

## Eleven's Story by pathvain\_aelien

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**Summary:**

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

# 1. Chapter 1

“Are you going to tell him?”

Dustin looks around at the blatantly loud voice that is Lucas’s attempt at a whisper. He doesn’t have to ask what Lucas means, because he already knows. They don’t have any super powers of their own, but they have the connection that comes from years of friendship.

“Why should I tell him? You’re the one that started it,” Dustin points out reasonably.

“Uh, how did I start it? You didn’t see me kissing El, did you?”

“Sweden.” It’s the only thing Dustin says. The only thing he has to say.

Lucas sighs. He opens his mouth to begin the latest round of squabbling, but he’s interrupted when Mike, Eleven and Will join them.

“Hey guys,” Dustin says, in a falsely cheerful voice. He pastes on a wide smile. Lucas and Will roll their eyes but Mike doesn’t notice the odd tone. Lucas can tell that Mike is still on cloud 9, judging from the dopey look on his face. He probably wouldn’t notice if they all spontaneously combusted right now.

“Hey,” Will replies, then turns to Mike. “Your place tomorrow?”

“Yeah, come over whenever.” Mike looks at Eleven. “You want to come over tomorrow? We’re going to start working on the science fair project; you can help if you want.”

Dustin opens his mouth, thinking that Eleven would be the coolest thing they could write about for their project. They’d definitely win, unlike last year’s travesty. Lucas shakes his head just once, firmly, and Dustin closes his mouth. Oh yeah. Probably not the most sensitive thing he could say. El is kind of already a science project.

“Okay,” Eleven tells him, and smiles. Mike smiles back. Dustin mimics them immediately, giving Lucas a sappy look, but Lucas

doesn't return it. Lucas gives Mike a pass this time. He has to; because he's pretty sure he's been giving his own sappy looks this evening.

Without another word between them, they move toward the parking lot. Joyce is waiting patiently. Steve isn't here yet, and Mike and Lucas are riding together with Nancy. The Snow Ball is officially over for another year. They slowly walk Will to the waiting car.

"See you guys," Will says, waving at them before opening the door. The guys wave back, distracted, because they're debating the topic of this year's project. It has to be awesome. Eleven smiles at Will and he returns it. She doesn't hug him this time, because she can't. One of her arms is already doing something else. She's holding Mike's hand. Joyce gives her a little hug as best as she can, without making her break contact with Mike.

"You look beautiful," Joyce whispers in her ear. "Did you have a good time?" Eleven nods and smiles. She glances automatically at her hand-the hand entwined with Mike's-and Joyce laughs.

"I'll see you soon, sweetie," Joyce says, before going around to the front of the car. Eleven sees movement out of the corner of her eye. It's Hopper. He's leaning against his station wagon and smoking a cigarette. He doesn't look cranky, which is a change for him. He looks patient.

Mike catches sight of him, too, and breaks off the conversation with the guys. The Snow Ball is officially over, and it's time to walk El to her car. He smiles at her as they leave the guys to their bickering. Eleven waves with her free hand and Lucas waves back. Dustin doesn't wave, he starts following them instead. He's not even thinking about it, it's just what they do. Walking their friends to their cars or bikes or whatever other mode of transportation is available to them. He doesn't even consider that Mike might want to do this alone. He's right on their heels until Lucas grabs his jacket and pulls him back.

"What?"

Lucas sighs. "Idiot." He doesn't bother to elaborate.

Dustin notices Mike giving El a hug. He's talking with her quietly. It's clearly a private moment, since they were on a date. Kind of. Oh.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh." Lucas rolls his eyes again and Dustin shrugs. They both retreat a few feet away and give their friends the illusion of privacy. Steve rolls up in front of them and Dustin grins. He cocks one finger at him.

Give me a minute.

Steve nods. He's rummaging through his glove compartment for some music. Coincidentally, it gives him the opportunity to avoid looking at Nancy, who is having her own private goodbye. Steve's fine with that. Really. Mostly. Jonathan is a great guy. He just doesn't want to see them kissing or anything, if he can avoid it.

Mike joins his friends and they wave as Hopper pulls around Steve's idling car. Eleven raises her hand in her own version of a wave, not actually moving her hand. Dustin would tease Mike mercilessly, but like Lucas, he gives him a pass. He's happy for him, and he kind of owes him one. They all do. Mike is going to lose his shit in approximately 40 seconds. He raises his eyebrows at Lucas.

"Um." It's the best Lucas can do, despite Dustin's encouraging nod.

Mike looks at him, waiting. Lucas cleans an invisible spot of lint from his sleeve for a few seconds, until Dustin glares at him.

"Uh. So. Um. Ah." He gives Dustin a helpless look.

"Jesus."

Mike turns to Dustin, raising his eyebrows.

Dustin rolls his eyes at Lucas before breaking the news.

"So, Mike. Science class might just be, like, a little bit awkward on Monday," Dustin tells him in a breezy voice.

"Why?"

“Well. You know. Mr. Clarke’s here.”

Oh. Shit. “Shit.”

“Yep.”

“Did he recognize El? She wore a wig last time!”

“Yep. Yep. Yes, he did.”

Shit. “Are you sure?”

Dustin bites his lip to keep from guffawing. It almost works.

“Uh, yeah. Pretty sure. Like, 100% sure, actually.”

Mike looks at Lucas, who is still picking at the spot of nothing on his sleeve, then back at Dustin. Neither one of his friends is meeting his eyes. They’re both staring into Steve’s window, as if watching him select cassettes is a fascinating way of passing the time. Mike sighs.

“What happened?”

Less than a minute later, the cassettes shoot out of Steve’s hands and onto the floor mat when Mike startles him with a scream.

“You told him WHAT?”

“Um...well. I might have said...that they do things differently in Sweden?” Lucas pulls a thread out of his sleeve, trying to avoid eye contact.

Dustin’s a little alarmed at the look on Mike’s face. His eyes are bulging and his face is red and it just doesn’t look very healthy, to be honest.

“Seriously?”

“Um. Yeah. And uh. Apparently, Will told him you guys are just... um...very close.” Lucas takes a quick peek at Mike’s face.

Dustin sniggers again, he can’t help it. Mike makes a strangled little noise and Dustin rearranges his face into a suitably somber

expression of commiseration.

“What the fuck? Seriously?”

Lucas glares at him. “Well, how else was I supposed to explain it? We told him she was your cousin!”

“Yeah, and why did you guys tell him that?”

“Hey! I made her your second cousin,” Dustin points out helpfully. “To give you a little leeway.”

“Oh, like you planned this would happen,” Lucas sneers at him.

Dustin ignores him. “You’re welcome,” he tells Mike, trying not to giggle.

Mike gives him an exasperated look. “Are you serious?” He faces Lucas again. “Why did you have to tell him she was my cousin?”

“We needed a cover story! And I didn’t exactly hear you come up with anything better. Besides, how was I supposed to know you’d start, like, making out with her in front of him later?”

“We were not making out!” Mike screams.

If his voice gets any higher, Dustin thinks, only a dog would be able to hear it.

Lucas sighs and gives him a patented are you kidding me look. The look expands to include Dustin as soon as he speaks.

“That’s technically true, I think. I think making out involves tongue,” Dustin tells them both thoughtfully.

They both give him a vicious look and he spreads his hands.

“What? What did I say?”

“Why don’t you ask Steve,” Lucas snaps sarcastically. “Isn’t he the dating expert or whatever? Although Nancy dumped his ass, and for Jonathan.” He glances at Will. “No offense.”

Will shrugs.

Dustin doesn't even notice their exchange. "That's a good idea," he says, brightening.

"Seriously?" Mike and Lucas ask in unison.

"STEVE!"

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

His friends try to give him a pep talk before Clarke's class on Monday. They aren't doing a very good job of it. In fact, they're failing miserably, because Mike actually feels worse than he did a few minutes ago.

"He probably doesn't even remember," Will lies. There's a couple of moments of awkward silence. He glares at his friends, imploring them to agree with him.

"Yeah! He was really busy. I bet he didn't even notice," Dustin says encouragingly.

"Uh, he dumped an entire cup of Kool-Aid on himself. I think he noticed."

"Shut up, Lucas."

"Sorry. Anyway, it's going to be fine."

"Is it?" Mike asks him grumpily.

Lucas claps him on the back but doesn't answer.

Max laughs. "Are you kidding me? The guy thinks you were making out with your cousin. That doesn't sound fine at all."

Mike sighs and covers his face with his hands. Dustin glares at Max until she holds up her hands in apology.

Dustin leaps to Mike's defense. "They weren't making out! Right? Making out has tongues. Steve said. Were there tongues, Mike?"

"No." His voice is muffled because he's still covering up his face. He looks like he's trying to suffocate himself with his own hands.



“Okay then. So it was just like, a kiss. A kiss is no big deal! French people kiss each other all the time and it doesn’t mean anything except like, hello. Or that’s a nice outfit.”

Mike finally drops his hands to stare at him in disbelief. Lucas just scowls at him so he tries to explain it a little better.

“Well. It’s kind of the same. Although I guess they don’t do it on the mouth. Do they? I don’t really know. I haven’t been to France. Yet, anyway. Um. Anyway, Sweden is pretty close to France. I’m sure it’s the same thing over there. With the random kissing, I mean...”

He would probably keep babbling, except that Lucas punches him and he finally falls silent, rubbing his shoulder.

Mike covers his face again and Will pats him on the back.

“It’s okay. Mr. Clarke is awesome. It’s not going to be weird, or anything.” He’s using his most soothing voice and gently pushing Mike into the room as he speaks. Dustin blocks the doorway so there’s no escape, because Mike is casting longing looks back into the hallway.

“Right! It won’t be weird at all. Not weird at all!” Dustin repeats, and grins.

It’s weird. It’s very weird and awkward and completely horrible. Mr. Clarke barely even looks at him during class, which is definitely unusual. He doesn’t look disgusted or anything, which is a plus. But he looks like he’s even more mortified than Mike, if such a thing were possible.

Dustin tries to distract Clarke by raising his hand as often as possible, because Mr. Clarke still kind of looks like someone punched him. Dustin can’t even imagine what that must feel like, to think a couple of cousins are in love with each other and making out. Or not making out, since that has tongues. Whatever. He’s pretty sure that doesn’t exactly happen in Sweden. Although the whole cousin thing was perfectly acceptable in what Dustin thinks of as “back in the day.” In fact, it was kind of expected! Maybe he should point that out to Mike. Maybe that will cheer him up. He sneaks a look at Mike and wisely

decides to keep his mouth shut.

Mr. Clarke doesn't linger after class, which is unusual. It's more than unusual, actually. It's unheard of. Mike looks so dejected that the normally even-tempered Will is angry. He's not angry with Mike, just at the situation. Everything should be fine now. He's okay. Eleven is back, and more than okay. And Mike has been so happy. Everyone should be happy now. It's not fair, to have one thing after another. In the grand scheme of things, it's not a big deal. It's just a misconception one teacher has. But on the other hand, it's everything. They all love Mr. Clarke. Mr. Clarke is amazing, and Mike respects him and cares about his opinion. They all do. He knows that Mike can't bear for Clarke to think badly of him, especially when there's no basis for it.

"If only we could tell him," Will says quietly. Lucas and Dustin don't hear him, they're chatting with Max. They're going to the arcade after school. Mike nods miserably but doesn't speak. If only.

He's still turning the phrase over in his mind a few hours later. Ostensibly he's doing his homework, but he's read the same math problem at least three times without it leaving any impression in his brain. Something about  $x$ , he assumes.

If only.

A lot of people know the truth now. A lot of people, including a girl they've only known for a couple of months and Nancy's ex-boyfriend. Hell, even Troy and James know something. Mr. Clarke knows nothing, which is completely unfair. Mr. Clarke is a scientist. He loves knowledge. He lives for the pursuit of fact and truth. Surely he deserves to know their truth? He's a good guy, a great guy, actually. He helped them find Will in a dozen different ways, without even being aware of it. He deserves to know, for fuck's sake. And what's the harm? It can't be dangerous, not anymore. The lab is closed. Eleven is officially Hopper's daughter. Presumably she'll be able to live a completely normal life pretty soon.

Mike slams his math book shut. He doesn't give a fuck about  $x$ , not right now. The whole idea of telling Mr. Clarke is futile. How is he supposed to approach Clarke with the truth? Just sit him down and

say, hey. By the way, I'm not into my cousin. She's actually not related to me at all. Although she did live with me for a week. Well, in the basement, anyway. Oh yeah, and she has super powers. Oh, and also, there's a whole other dimension and she kind of opened it accidentally. But don't worry, she closed it later. Anyway, here's my homework. No doubt that little talk would smooth over any lingering awkwardness. Clarke would probably send him straight to the school counselor, actually. If only there were a way to tell him the truth, without just coming out and fucking saying it.

Mike opens his math book again and pulls his notebook paper toward him. He stares at the problem unseeingly, and then shakes his head as if he could empty the thoughts of Clarke that way. He stares at the problem, trying to focus.

Simplify the following algebraic expression.

$$-6x + 5 + 12x - 6$$

That's easy. Mike knows it's easy. He doesn't know why he's wasted the last ten minutes reading over the same problem, to be honest. He grabs his pencil and lowers it to the notebook. Copies the problem down. Pauses, tapping his pencil on the paper. Instead of simplifying, he writes something else.

The Demogorgon got Will.

First in our campaign, and then later, on the way home.

Fuck x. x is forgotten. Once he starts, he keeps going. He only pauses to grab another handful of notebook paper. It takes him four days, even writing as fast as he can. He still has to be careful. He wants to make sure he gets it all. And he still has to complete his homework, go to class, see his friends, and do everything else that's part of his normal day. He tells himself there's no rush, but there is. For him, anyway. He wants to finish it before he can change his mind. And he still has to get the permission of the party.

It's not just his story, after all.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

He brings it up to them on the weekend, once he's finished and has edited and re-edited. He starts with the original party, although it's Eleven's permission that matters the most. It's her story. Her life. And he won't hand these pages over unless she's okay with it.

He finishes reading the pages, then looks up at his friends.

"Well?"

Dustin and Lucas glance at each other. Will's the first to give his assent.

"Yeah. I think it's a good idea. I'm in."

"What took you so long?" Dustin asks him, and they all laugh. Mike turns to Lucas. They've argued about this knowledge before, about keeping and breaking secrets. Mike knows he acted like an asshole about it the last time, and Lucas was an asshole the time before that. Technically, it's Lucas's turn now.

"You kind of made me out to be an asshole, you know," Lucas tells him seriously.

Dustin laughs and gives him a companionable punch to the shoulder. "Dude. You kind of were an asshole. For a few days, anyway."

Lucas stretches in his chair. "I guess that's true."

Lucas grins at Mike and Mike exhales a breath he wasn't aware he was holding. Lucas gives him a thumbs-up and Mike smiles. There's just one more person he needs to ask. The most important person.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Eleven is sprawled on the basement couch. Mike's sitting on the floor

with his back leaning against it. He's spent the last hour and a half reading the pages to her. She likes it when he reads to her. He does all of the voices. When he's reading about the Demogorgon, he stalks around the room and growls, clawing at the air. It's funny when he does it and she nearly rolls right off the couch because she's laughing so hard. They're both surprised to find themselves giggling over a moment that was terrifying and traumatic. They're both surprised to find that they're healing.

She likes hearing his stories, even the true one. She especially likes hearing what he's written about her. When he's reading the Eleven and Mike parts, her favorite parts, his voice drops to a mumble and he doesn't act it out because he's embarrassed. She can tell he's embarrassed because he turns pink. That's why he's sitting with his back to her now. In the excitement of writing these pages, he kind of forgot that she'd be reading them, too.

She hasn't answered Mike's question, she's been staring at the ceiling and thinking of their story. She remembers now that he's asked her something, because he's turned around to face her. She meets his eyes and smiles.

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure? I know some of this stuff is pretty private. It's completely up to you. I don't mind if Mr. Clarke thinks...well, whatever." Mike trails off lamely. He does mind, of course, but not at the expense of what Eleven wants.

"I'm sure."

Mike's face is crinkled in worry. She smiles a little.

"Okay, but I could take some of it out? If there's anything you don't want me to include?"

Eleven giggles a little because he looks so anxious. Mike finally relaxes and grins at her.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

“I like it.”

Mike drops the pages onto the floor.

“Okay then.” He leans back against the couch. His head is very close to her. His hair looks nice. She can smell the hair soap. She stretches a hand out and touches it. It’s soft. Mike turns pink again but she can see him in profile. She can see he’s smiling.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

The pages are ready on Monday. He's carefully recopied them, because he's made a lot of revisions. Mike anxiously waits for the bell, hoping Mr. Clarke stays after class this time. Dustin's prepared for this eventuality. As soon as the bell rings, Dustin's ready.

"Mr. Clarke!" It's almost a shout. Mr. Clarke looks up in surprise as his students stream past him and out the door. He forgets to tell them to bring in their science fair proposals by Wednesday.

"Yes, Dustin?"

Dustin's at a loss. Mr. Clarke settles himself behind his desk. He makes no move to hurry out of the classroom, which Dustin pretty much banked on.

"Uh."

Dustin glances around the room. Lucas, Will, and Max are hovering near the door. Mike's holding a sheaf of papers. Otherwise the room is empty.

"I just wanted to say that was a great lesson. A splendid lesson. The best. That thing with the brain was awesome." He's aware that he's babbling, but he's not really concerned about it. It just happens sometimes.

Mr. Clarke smiles at him. "Thank you."

“Right. Anyway. That’s all I wanted to say. Good evening. Although it’s not really evening, since it’s not after five. Anyway.” Dustin can feel Mike hovering impatiently and he closes his mouth. He offers a feeble wave and makes himself scarce. Mr. Clarke looks at Mike as he approaches. Mike’s a little nervous, and Scott can see it.

“Mr. Clarke?”

“Yes?”

“I...um. Uh. I wrote a story. I was wondering if...you’d take a look at it?”

Mr. Clarke smiles at him. It’s a kind smile, the smile he always has for his students. “I’d love to. What kind of story is it?”

“It’s kind of a science fiction story. I thought maybe you could give me some feedback.”

Mr. Clarke’s already reaching for the stapled pages. “I love science fiction.”

Mike gives him a distracted smile.

“Is this for English class? Is there a deadline?”

“Nah. I mean, no. It’s strictly extra-curricular.”

Mr. Clarke glances down at the pages. “I can’t wait.” There may be some lingering awkwardness between them, but his tone is completely sincere. Mike gives him a more genuine smile this time.

“Thank you,” Mike says, grabbing his backpack. “See you tomorrow.”

“Have a good one, Mike.”

Scott carefully packs the story into his briefcase. He’ll wait another half hour, just in case anyone needs him, before heading home for the day. He’s curious. Mike looked so intense. And he’s a very creative person. Scott can’t wait to see what his student has written.

He only has to wait for a few hours. He has a couple of errands to



take care of after school, and then he makes dinner, just a salad and some pasta. It's 7 pm before he's relaxing in his wingback with Mike's story. The first page is completely blank. Apparently Mike hasn't titled it yet. Scott carefully flips the page and turns on his reading lamp.

The Demogorgon got Will.

First in our campaign, and then later, on the way home.

That's not the official story. The official story is that he got lost in the woods for a week. As if Will would ever get lost. He carries a compass with him everywhere. And a backup compass. And a backup to the backup. None of us ever get lost. How can we, when we're always prepared? He's also taken Mirkwood, our short-cut, a couple of times a week for years. There's no way he would get lost.

But that's the official story, anyway, because that's easier to believe than the truth.

The truth is a secret. But that doesn't mean that a lot of people don't know about it. The truth is dangerous, even now, when it's all over.

And the truth isn't simple. It's not as easy to understand as a kid getting lost in the woods. The truth is a lot scarier than that.

The truth is, Will was taken by the Demogorgon. Not the one from Dungeons and Dragons, but the real one. A monster. Something from a different dimension.

We didn't know the truth at first. All we knew is that our friend was missing. And that we had to find him. It's not that we didn't think the police could find him. It's just that we know him better. We thought we could do it. And maybe we didn't trust Hopper, maybe that's true. It wasn't a secret, how much he drank. Although he doesn't do that anymore. He can't.

We snuck out late at night and looked for him, looking all over Mirkwood. We were positive we'd find him, because it felt like we were being led to that spot for a reason. And we were, it just wasn't the reason we were expecting. We didn't find Will that night.

We found someone else.

Will is the reason we were out there, and we weren't going to give up on him, but he's not the main character in this story.

She is.

Her hair was buzzed, nearly shaved. We could tell right away that she needed help. It was raining and cold, and she was only wearing a shirt from Benny's Burgers. She wouldn't speak. We thought she couldn't speak, couldn't tell us what was wrong, or why she was out there alone.

We didn't think twice about what to do. We didn't argue about her, not then. I gave her my jacket and we brought her home, because that's what we were supposed to do. I knew that we were supposed to find her. I just didn't know why.

I set up a fort in the basement for her and gave her some clothes. I didn't learn everything about her all at once, just a little, piece by piece. I learned my first thing about her right then. I walked her to the bathroom so she could change and realized she was afraid of being closed in. I didn't know why, but I could see it on her face. And she said her first word. No.

The arguing started that night, right then, and it didn't really stop until the end of that week. When it was nearly over. We argued about what to do with her. Lucas didn't like her, not then. Not at first. He thought she was crazy, that she'd escaped from the mental hospital. He thought she was a distraction, since we'd set out to find Will, not a scared girl.

Dustin was a little more accepting. He knew that she needed help. The only thing we agreed on is that we couldn't tell anyone, especially not my parents. They'd find out we'd snuck out, and we'd all be grounded. They were all worried about us being outside, because of Will. Because they thought he'd been kidnapped. We couldn't tell them. I came up with the only idea I could think of. We'd let her sleep in the basement that night, and then she could ring the doorbell the next day. I thought my mom would help her.

When the guys left, I gave her my sleeping bag. I asked her what her

name was. I wasn't sure if she'd answer, because she still wasn't speaking. And she didn't speak, but she told me her name. She rolled up her sleeve. She had a tattoo on her left wrist. 011. I didn't know what it meant, so I asked her. She pointed to herself. I didn't make a big deal out of it, not like the other guys did. Her name was Eleven. Okay. I told her my name, Michael. Mike. I wanted to give her a nickname, too. El. I told her good night and she finally spoke. She said my name. She told me good night.

The next morning, I knew I had to hurry. And I knew El would be hungry. I wasn't sure when she'd last eaten anything; although I figured she'd eaten at Benny's at some point, considering the shirt. I couldn't sneak very much downstairs because everyone was still home, but I brought her Eggos. It's kind of funny now, because she was obsessed with Eggos. She could eat them all day long and never get sick of them.

While she was eating, I told her my plan. I expected her to be okay with it, to be happy, even, to have a grownup to figure things out. She spoke again. I was figuring out by this time that she used her words very sparingly. She spoke with her eyes, instead. This time it was important enough for her to use her voice. She said no. She said it more than once.

I could tell something was wrong. I had thought maybe she was lost. I hadn't considered that she was hiding. That she was in trouble. I asked her who she was in trouble with, and she spoke again. Bad. Bad people. I could see the truth in her face. She looked devastated. Terrified. I asked her if they were trying to hurt her. She didn't speak, but brought her fingers to her forehead and mimed shooting herself. Mimed shooting me. She asked me if I understood. I did. I didn't know why someone would want to hurt her, or hurt me, but I understood. I knew we'd have to keep her safe, and to do that, we'd have to keep her a secret. That's all I needed to know.

I skipped school that day, because I had to. I had to make sure she would be okay. I thought I could keep her safe, which is pretty funny, considering everything that happened.

I showed her around my house, because dad was at work and Nancy was at school. Mom was out with Holly. I don't think El had ever

seen a TV before. She was scared of my dad's La-Z-Boy. When she sat in it, I flipped the handle and she was startled into laughing. I think she was partly startled because she was laughing. I don't think she'd ever done that before. Ever.

I showed her my science fair trophies. I didn't show her the picture frame next to them, because I didn't have to. She was staring at it. Staring at Will. She pointed at him, and I could tell from her face that she knew who he was. That he was in trouble.

I tried to ask her how she knew him, but she couldn't answer and we didn't have time. My mom was home. We ran to toward the basement but mom was already coming inside. I had to hide her. We ran back to my room and I opened my closet. I knew she didn't want to go in there, that she was scared. But it was the only place to hide her. I told her I'd be right back. I promised. She didn't know what that word meant, so I told her. I could see that she was terrified and I didn't force her. I asked her and she went in. I don't know if she trusted me to keep my promise, or if she just knew that there wasn't anything else we could do.

I was only gone for a few minutes, but when I came back, she was crying. She looked broken. I've never seen anyone look that way before. She looked at me like I'd been gone for years, like I'd left her alone for that long. Alone in the dark. She said my name. I could tell then, she hadn't expected me to come back. I asked her if she was okay, and she nodded. She smiled. I think maybe that's when she started trusting me, when I came back for her. I could tell she wasn't used to it. I didn't know anything about the Bad Men yet, but I knew they'd hurt her before.

I needed to talk to the guys. Things were different now. Somehow, El knew about Will. They weren't happy about the change in plans, especially Lucas. I told them that maybe the bad men who were after her had taken Will. Dustin believed me, believed it was a possibility, anyway, but Lucas didn't. He was too worried about Will to think about anything else. Lucas didn't have the patience to wait, to try to understand why she wouldn't talk. He stalked over to where she was sitting in her fort and yelled at her. He asked her where Will was. He called her crazy and said we needed to talk to my parents.

I tried to explain, that Eleven had said we would be in danger if we

did. Dustin was worried, he believed me. Lucas didn't. He just scoffed about her name. I showed them, the same way El had shown me. Lucas slapped my hand and made for the door. He was being an asshole about it, but I didn't really blame him. I knew he was just worried about Will. He snapped at us, and said we were going to tell my mom. He opened the door, but before he could leave, it slammed shut. He opened it again. It slammed shut again, this time hard enough to rattle the toys on my dresser. The door locked. We all saw it. And we all knew somehow, who had done it. Even though it was impossible. We all looked at Eleven. She was standing up. She looked more determined than I'd seen her before. Fierce.

And her nose was bleeding.

She said one word.

"No."

## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

I think Lucas was scared of her. Dustin, however, thawed completely. He thought she was awesome. That she had super powers. I could tell Lucas was trying to give her a chance. I think he knew that she could really help, even if he didn't want to admit it. Super powers might be the only way to find Will. He didn't apologize, but he did try to explain. He said he was worried about our friend. She didn't know what that word meant, either. Lucas scoffed a little but tried to explain. I jumped in before he could finish, because I could tell she was getting upset.

She didn't like not knowing things. It just made her feel more different. And she already felt that way.

I told her that friends never break a promise. I meant that I would never break a promise. I wanted her to know she could trust me. That she was safe now. And I told her that friends tell each other everything. I wanted her to know that she could talk to us. I wanted to find Will, and we needed more information from her to do that. But that wasn't all. I wanted to know everything about her, everything she was willing to tell me. I don't think that's when it started, the way I felt about her. I think it started when I first saw her. But that's the first time I was actually aware of it, even for a second.

Eleven sat at our table, in front of the D&D board. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. She was concentrating.

“El?”

She opened her eyes. Without hesitating, she grabbed the wizard off the board. Will the Wise. She knew it was his, somehow. She said his name.

“Did you see him? On Mirkwood?”

She didn’t answer.

“Do you know where he is?”

She finally looked at me. She swept the rest of the figures off the board and flipped it over to the back. The black side. She slapped Will the Wise in the center of the board.

“I don’t understand.”

“Hiding,” she told me, without looking at me. Her gaze was fixed on the figure.

“Will is hiding?”

She nodded. Dustin and Lucas looked excited, because we were finally making progress. And we were seeing her see Will. Somehow.

“From the Bad Men?” It’s what I expected. It made sense, that people who would hurt Eleven, people who would tattoo her, would take another kid. But she shook her head immediately.

“Then from who?”

Eleven grabbed the other figurine without even looking for it. She just knew. She slapped it down right next to the wizard.

We were all startled. I could see it in their faces. Lucas looked scared. Dustin was terrified. He grabbed his hat and clutched it as we all looked at the pieces on the board. Will. And the Demogorgon.

We didn’t know what to say. I think we weren’t sure exactly what she meant. At first, it seemed obvious. A monster had taken Will. But life isn’t a Dungeons and Dragons game, and Eleven wasn’t able to

explain what she meant. Lucas recovered first. He's probably the most logical of us, the most rational. Monsters don't fit in with any kind of rational thinking. He probably thought it was the only analogy she knew how to give us. Dustin was more on the fence about it. He wasn't sure what to believe. I believed her. If she had meant something else, she wouldn't have grabbed the Demogorgon. And I had asked her if she meant the Bad Men. She didn't. Something else had taken Will, and Will was hiding from it.

I like to think of myself as a rational person, too. I guess everyone does. But I'm also more adaptable than Lucas. It's not rational to think a bunch of people would be willing to hurt a kid, to tattoo her and name her a number. But we'd all seen the tattoo, and we'd all seen how scared she was. How different. Her speech or lack of it wasn't the crux of the difference. Lucas could scoff at Dustin's super power term, but it was true. She did have a super power. Telekinesis isn't exactly rational, either, and we saw the proof of that when she locked the door.

The guys didn't stick around for long after that. It was getting late. Although they rode their bikes over after school, Dustin didn't want to bike home. Lucas lived right next door, so that was easy. We just walked him to his door. My dad drove Dustin home. The fact that both of them seemed relieved showed me that on some level, they already believed.

El was already asleep when I came back in. I didn't realize it then, but using her power exhausted her pretty fast. And I think she'd been having trouble sleeping, before. I noticed something before I went upstairs. Although I gave her my sleeping bag and blankets, she wasn't under them. She was laying on top of them. Even in sleep, she was ready to run if needed. I don't know how to explain how awful that was, to see her like that. She was just a kid, around my age, and she didn't feel safe enough to ever relax. I hated that she had to feel that way, that whatever had happened to her had made it impossible to just sleep.

I started to turn the light off, and then remembered. She didn't like being in closed in spaces, and she didn't like the dark. I switched the lamp on before turning the light off. The lamp was bright and it was better than a night-light. I had only gone up a couple of steps when



she spoke.

“Thank you.”

I paused, looking over at her. Her eyes were still closed.

“Welcome.” I waited a few more seconds, but she didn’t say anything else. “Good night, El.”

“Good night, Mike.”

I tossed and turned for what felt like a very long time before I was able to fall asleep. I kept thinking of the Demogorgon. I didn’t know what it looked like, but I imagined it looked like my figurine. Why had it taken him in the first place? Was anyone else missing? I wondered how long Will would be able to hide from it, from a monster.

It probably wasn’t surprising that I had a nightmare about the Demogorgon. In my dream it had three heads and about a million teeth. Will was hiding, but it found him. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t do anything to help him. It killed him right in front of me. I just kept screaming, and then it turned its three heads to face me.

That’s when I woke up. I stared at the ceiling in the darkness, trying to catch my breath. I heard a slight creak at the foot of my bed and I panicked all over again. There was something standing there, right in front of me. Moving toward me.

I jerked too hard to the left, away from it, and rolled right off the bed. I landed hard on my elbow and my legs got stuck in the tangled blankets. They were still on my bed and I couldn’t kick them free.

My room was completely silent, but I could still see the shadow standing motionless on the other side of the bed, where I’d been. I leaned forward and groped for my lamp, fixing my eyes on the shadow. I flicked the lamp on, holding my breath.

When I could see, I flopped bonelessly to the floor, legs still on my bed. It wasn’t a monster. It was just Eleven.

She didn’t say anything, and I gradually became aware of how stupid I must have looked, dangling from my bed. I freed my legs from the

blankets and stood up, walking over to her. She just watched me, she hadn't said a word.

"El? What are you doing in here? What's wrong?"

She didn't answer.

"Let's go back downstairs, okay?" I whispered it, acutely aware that someone might hear me talking and come to investigate. "Is that okay?" She nodded, and I peeked out into the hallway before motioning her to follow me. When we were back downstairs, I sat on the couch and she sat next to me.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

She looked at me blankly. "Nightmare?"

"Yeah. You know, a bad dream? Like, a scary or sad dream?"

Eleven was quiet for a long time. I didn't think she was going to answer, but she finally did. "There are other kinds?"

"What?"

"Other dreams?"

I stared at her. "You mean, are there other kinds of dreams besides bad ones?"

She nodded. I looked away so she wouldn't see the expression on my face, because I knew I probably looked exactly how I felt. Shocked and horrified. She'd never had a good dream? Never? Where the hell had she been, what had happened to her, that she couldn't have a good dream? Or even a regular, weird dream that meant nothing at all?

I stared at my bare feet. "Yeah. There are good dreams, too."

"How many?"

"Um. I don't know. There's not, like, a certain amount. Everyone dreams different things. You have happy dreams when you're happy,

and bad dreams when you're worried or upset."

Eleven looked down.

"Now that you're away from the Bad Men though, I bet you'll start having good dreams. When you really start to feel safe."

She looked at me hopefully, and I smiled. I wanted to reassure her that bad dreams happen to everyone, not just her. I didn't want to make her feel alone.

"I had a bad dream, too."

She waited for me to continue.

"It was about the Demogorgon." I didn't go into any more detail than that, because I didn't want to scare her.

Her face closed up then, and she looked away from me. I'd meant to make her feel better, but somehow I'd made it worse. I wondered if she'd seen it somewhere. I'd assumed that she'd sensed it somehow with her powers. But maybe she saw it take Will?

"In my dream, it had three heads." I watched her carefully.

"No."

"No? It doesn't have three heads?"

"One."

She must have seen it. I wanted to know more but I could tell she didn't want to talk about it.

"Sometimes if you talk about a dream, it makes you feel better and you won't have it again. What did you dream about?"

She was silent for a long time. "Papa."

"Papa? Where are your parents? What happened to them?" I couldn't resist asking.

"No."

“No, what? You don’t have parents?”

“No. Just Papa.”

She was starting to look upset again.

I quickly looked around the room for something to distract her.

“You want to play cards?”

“Cards?”

“Yeah. It’s a game?”

She didn’t look very interested.

“Okay, um.” I stood up and rummaged through stuff. I tossed a couple of movies aside. We couldn’t watch a movie, because the TV was upstairs. And my mom would flip if she found out I was up this late on a school night. I grabbed a couple of books.

“You want me to read you a story? I mean, we can’t read it all tonight, because they’re pretty long, but we can start one.” That always used to help me after a bad dream.

She nodded.

“Okay, which one do you want?”

I handed her the stack and she turned them over, one by one. She finally handed them back to me and shrugged.

“You want me to pick?”

She nodded.

“Okay, get comfortable.”

She got into her fort and stretched out. I sat just outside it. She handed me a pillow and I stretched out, too.

“Thanks. Okay. Here we go. Let me know if you get bored, okay? If you don’t like it, I mean.”

She nodded.

“Okay. In a hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit.”

“What’s a Hobbit?”

“I’m about to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. So anyway, he lives in a hole. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort...”

I read for a long time, until we got to the trolls. I checked my watch. It was getting late. Or early. Or both. I glanced up and she had her eyes closed.

“El?”

She didn’t move. I waited nearly a full minute, before closing the book and setting it down. This time I didn’t bother with the lamp, I just left the light on.

The guys came over before school. I was exhausted but determined. We needed to find Will. They were supposed to bring supplies over. Lucas, the most practical of us, came prepared for anything. Binoculars, an army knife, and his wrist rocket, among other things. He came prepared, but he was quick to tell us his rationality had returned along with daylight.

“The Demogorgon’s not real. It’s made up.”

He immediately amended that statement, though. “But if there is something out there, I’m gonna shoot it in the eye...and blind it.” He demonstrated and Dustin flinched. Lucas looked almost excited.

I sighed. “Dustin, what did you get?”

Dustin dumped out his backpack in response. Candy. Junk food. He pretty much bought up all of aisle 4. He thoughtfully included a

banana and an apple along with all the other junk.

We were exasperated but not really surprised. Dustin pointed out that we'd need the energy to find Will. Although Pez probably wasn't the best choice.

Because they can't go a few minutes without arguing, Dustin turned on Lucas and asked him why we needed weapons, anyway. I think he was trying to provoke him into admitting that he was giving the monster idea a little credence, even if he wasn't willing to admit it. But Dustin had another reason for asking.

"We have her," he snapped, gesturing at El.

Lucas groaned. "She shut one door!" As is that wasn't something straight out of the movies. As if we could easily do that, whenever the hell we wanted.

"With her mind!" Dustin yelled. "Are you kidding me? That's insane! Imagine all the other cool stuff she could do. Like..." He abandoned his snacks and strode over to the couch.

"I bet...that she could make this fly!" He couldn't hide the excitement in his voice. He grabbed my Millennium Falcon. "Hey. Hey." Eleven glanced up from my super-comm. She'd taken to playing with it constantly, switching the channels. "Okay. Concentrate, okay?" He let go of the Falcon and it crashed to the floor. El just watched him expressionlessly.

Dustin was undaunted. He tried again. He reminded her to use her powers, as if it hadn't been apparent before. He let go again. And it crashed to the floor again. Eleven just stared at him. Dustin still looked hopeful, but I grabbed the Falcon before he could try it again and break anything else on it. Dustin wasn't acting like an asshole like Lucas, calling her a weirdo every few seconds, but he was treating her like a toy, or a supernatural pet. His personal Jedi. He just wanted her to do some tricks.

"She's not a dog," I snapped.

Dustin looked a little disappointed, but he didn't have time to argue. We had to go to school. I couldn't skip this time. I left the snacks for Eleven and told her to stay downstairs.

“You know those power lines?”

“Power lines?”

“Yeah. The ones behind my house?”

“Yes,” she answered, but hesitantly.

“Meet us there, after school.”

“After...school?”

“Yeah, 3:15.”

She looked a little lost. “Oh.” I took off my watch and gestured. She held out her wrist, the one with the tattoo and I fastened it.

“When the numbers read three-one-five, meet us there.”

“Three-one-five,” she repeated, looking at the watch.

“Three-one-five,” I said, smiling at her. She smiled back, an Eleven smile. Just a tiny raising of one side of her mouth, like she wasn’t sure she was supposed to be smiling. Like she wasn’t sure smiling was safe.

During recess, we checked behind the school. We needed rocks for the wrist-rocket. “How about this one?” I asked. I handed it to Dustin and he gave it a cursory glance.

“Too big for the sling.” He dropped it unceremoniously, turning around to scan the grass.

“So, do you think Eleven was born with her powers, like the X-Men, or do you think she acquired them, like...like Green Lantern?” He’d clearly been giving this a lot of thought. I hadn’t really thought about it. Her powers were just part of her, that’s all.

“She’s not a superhero. She’s a weirdo,” Lucas scoffed.

“Why does that matter? The X-Men are weirdos,” I snapped.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “If you love her so much, why don’t you marry

her?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mike, seriously?”

“What?”

Lucas spread his hands wide. “You look at her all, like...” He started walking toward me, hands clasped to his chest and speaking with a lame falsetto. “Hi, El! El! El! El! I love you so much!” He grabbed me and hugged me before sinking to one knee. “Would you marry me?”

“Shut up, Lucas.”

“Yeah, shut up, Lucas.” We all glanced over at the new voice. I think I can speak for all of us when I say our hearts sank. Troy and James.

“What are you losers doing back here?”

“Probably looking for their missing friend,” James sneered.

“That’s not funny. It’s serious. He’s in danger,” Dustin told them angrily.

“I hate to break it to you, Toothless, but he’s not in danger. He’s dead. That’s what my dad says,” Troy said. He sounded gleeful. “He said he was probably killed by some other queer.”

They both laughed.

I could feel Dustin tense next to me. “Come on. Just ignore them.” I didn’t want to ignore them, but I knew the odds. We’d get our asses kicked and wouldn’t be able to find Will at all. I brushed past them without looking at them and Lucas started to follow. Predictably, Troy stuck his foot out and I tripped. I went down hard, landing chin first on a huge rock. My teeth clicked together from the force of it and I immediately ran my tongue over them, making sure they were all there.

“Watch where you’re going, Frogface.” They high-fived and walked away.



Lucas pulled me up and Dustin steadied me when I stumbled. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” And I was. Mostly. I just had a huge scrape on my chin. Dustin sighed and glanced down for a distraction.

“Hey. How about this one?” He handed me a rock and patted me on the shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” He patted me again.

I smiled. “Yeah, this is it.”

Lucas grinned at me when I handed it to him. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, this is the monster killer! Whoo!” He was going along with the theory now, just to cheer me up. To cheer us all up. It’s the only way to survive guys like Troy and James. Just to be with your friends.

I laughed.

Scott sighs, lowering the pages briefly. For a moment he’s forgotten he’s reading a fictional story. He feels a flash of anger at the two boys, the bullies. He reminds himself it’s just a story, although it definitely has elements of truth to it. He remembers the cut on Mike’s face perfectly well. He even remembers asking him about it. Mike told him he fell.

El was waiting for us at 3:15. We rode up to her. She wasn’t looking at us.

“El!”

She finally turned around. She looked shaken and upset.

“You okay?”

She nodded.

I patted the bike seat. “Hop on. We only have a few hours.” She hesitantly climbed on. I could tell she hadn’t been on a bike before,

not that I was surprised at that point. I got on in front of her and put her hands on my shoulders. Lucas and Dustin were already riding.

We rode for as long as we could, until there were too many rocks for it to be safe. Then I pushed my bike while she walked quietly beside me. The guys were behind us.

When she spoke, it surprised me. Both because she was talking and because it was the longest sentence she'd ever said.

"Why did they hurt you?"

I looked up at her, startled. She was still looking at me. She seemed a lot more there, more present, in that moment.

"What?"

She didn't respond, not with words. She just stretched a hand out toward my chin and pointed. I'd almost forgotten it, because it had stopped throbbing. I touched it.

"Oh, that." I paused. "Uh...I just fell at recess." I didn't intend to lie, it just happened. I didn't look at her because I'd never been a very good liar.

"Mike..."

"Yeah?"

"Friends...tell the truth."

I sighed. "I was tripped by this mouth breather, Troy, okay?" I could feel her watching me but I kept my eyes on my bike.

"Mouth breather?"

"Yeah. You know...a dumb person." I glanced at her. "A knucklehead."

"Knucklehead?"

"I don't know why I didn't tell you. Everyone at school knows." That

I'm a loser, I thought but didn't say. "I just didn't want you to think I was such a wastoid, you know?" I glanced at her quickly.

"Mike..."

"Yeah?"

She was watching me intently, forcing me to meet her eyes. She had an emphatic expression on her face. "I understand." And I could tell that she did. She understood perfectly. She knew all about mouth breathers, even if she didn't know the term.

"Oh. Okay, cool."

She smiled at me. A bigger smile this time. "Cool," she repeated. The way she said it made it sound almost like a joke. I smiled down at the bike. That wasn't the start of it, either. Like I said, that started when we first met. But it was part of it. She trusted me, trusted that we were her friends. She felt comfortable enough to make a joke. We were becoming closer, and I can't even describe how I felt.

Of course, I had to screw it up almost immediately.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

We walked for another hour, until it was dark. Eleven was leading us; we thought she would take us to Will, that she could track him somehow. Instead, she took us to Will's house. She stopped.

"Here."

I looked at the house. "Yeah, this is where Will lives."

She looked at me imploringly. "Hiding."

I didn't get it, although I should have. How else could she have led us here, if she didn't sense Will? She didn't know where he lived.

"No, no, this is where he lives. He's missing from here. Understand?"

Dustin dropped his bike beside me, panting.

"What are we doing here?" Lucas asked.

"She said he's hiding here," I told them.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Um...no!"

Even Dustin's patience was wearing thin. "I swear, if we walked all the way out here for nothing--"

Lucas threw his hands up in exasperation. "That's exactly what we did! I told you she didn't know what the hell she was talking about!" Eleven looked hurt, but not surprised. She looked almost like she'd

been expecting it. She was used to being hurt.

“Why did you bring us here?” I asked her gently.

She stammered, unable to find the words.

“Mike, don’t waste your time with her,” Lucas said through clenched teeth.

“What do you want to do, then?” I snapped.

“Call the cops, like we should have done yesterday.”

“We are not calling the cops!”

Lucas glared at me and I felt the rising frustration. He was being an asshole. I kept trying to remind myself that he was just worried about our friend. He was just scared. But that felt like a bullshit excuse. We were all worried and scared, and we weren’t all acting like assholes.

“Hey, guys?” Dustin interrupted.

“What other choice do we have?” Lucas asked, ignoring Dustin. I ignored him, too. Even Eleven ignored him, because she kept her eyes fixed on me.

“Guys!” Dustin screamed the words and we both turned to him, startled. He pointed through the trees to get our attention, but he didn’t have to. We didn’t have to call the cops. We could hear sirens. A lot of sirens. And somehow, we all knew.

“Will...”

We stared at each other for a second, then ran for our bikes, Eleven included. She jumped on behind me without any hesitation this time.

It wasn’t hard to follow them, there were so many. Cops and an ambulance and a fire truck. Basically every emergency service in Hawkins was out and blaring their sirens. We caught up to them at the quarry and my mouth went dry with fear. Everyone knew how dangerous the quarry was. People had been killed there before. We rode up behind the fire truck and quietly dropped our bikes, making

sure we were concealed from view.

I was the first to peer around the fire truck, with Eleven at my shoulder and the guys behind us. We all watched in silence as they pulled a body out of the water. A small body. I couldn't see it very well, even with the police spotlight. All I could see is that it was small. A kid. I saw Hopper, shaking his head and turning around, like he couldn't bear to look at it. That's when I knew, although I tried to deny it.

"It's not Will. It can't be." It was hard to speak around the dryness. My tongue felt like a cotton ball.

They dragged the body closer and the flashlights illuminated it. Illuminated him. We could see him. His clothes. When Lucas spoke, I could hear the catch in his voice.

"It's Will. It's really Will."

El and I moved at the same time. I didn't really notice it, but it happened a lot. Like we were always in sync. She turned to me but I didn't even look at her. I needed some space. I walked away from them all but Eleven followed me.

"Mike..."

Her voice was almost a sob but instead of comforting her, I felt a rush of fury. This was her fault. She wasn't responsible for Will's death, but she was responsible for the death of my hopes. Hopes that she'd raised. She'd made me think he was alive. She'd lied to me. She touched my back and I turned immediately. I slapped her hand away. I saw the horrified look on her face but I ignored it.

"Mike?" "Mike," what?" I snapped at her and she gasped.

She took a step back, away from the expression on my face. Away from my anger. I stepped forward.

"You were supposed to help us find him alive! You said he was alive!" I yelled into her face. I can't even begin to describe her expression. She looked at me like I was killing her somehow. It just made me angrier.

“Why did you lie to us? What’s wrong with you?”

I didn’t give her a chance to respond, although she wouldn’t have. I repeated the words in revulsion. “What is wrong with you?”

I ignored the tears in her eyes.

“Mike...” she whispered it.

“What?” I snapped.

She didn’t respond. She couldn’t. She just shook her head and pleaded with me with her eyes to understand. I ignored that, too. I gave her a disgusted look and turned my back on her. I forgot about the others, I was too wrapped up in my fury to notice that even Lucas thought I took it too far.

Lucas was crying. “Mike, come on. Don’t do this, man. Mike...”

“Mike, where are you going?” Dustin asked. “Mike!”

I grabbed my bike, completely disregarding the fact that Eleven would need a ride. That she was living in my basement. I’d let her find her own way back. If she even could. I didn’t give a shit, one way or the other. As I turned around and the guys shouted for me, I could feel her following me. Or trying to. But I didn’t even look back. I heard her sob when I rode away.

Of course, that wasn’t it. The guys brought her home, letting her in through the basement door. They didn’t stay. I didn’t even notice she was home until the next morning, although I didn’t sleep well. I kept fighting the impulse to check the basement.

I finally gave in at breakfast. If she was down there, she’d be hungry. I didn’t have to sneak food down this time, because my parents were giving me space. I’d just told them I wanted to eat downstairs and they nodded sympathetically. My mom loaded my plate with enough bacon and eggs to feed an army and kissed me on the forehead. I looked at my heaping plate and grudgingly went to the freezer to grab a couple of Eggos. We were running low. They wouldn’t fit on the plate and I crammed them into my pocket.

I walked downstairs. She was there. She was sitting in her fort, knees drawn up to her chest. She was resting her head on them and facing away from me. She looked like she'd been sitting like that all night. Maybe she had been. She lifted her head and turned my way when she heard my footsteps.

She looked at me cautiously as I approached. She stared at me intently, trying to read my expression. I don't know what I looked like, but I could tell she didn't find what she was looking for. She laid her head on her knees again and I handed her the plate. She didn't take it from me, so I sat on the floor in front of her. We'd have to share, but there was more than enough for both of us.

"Here. Bacon and eggs."

She raised her head an inch and looked at the food.

"Eggs?"

"Yeah. Eggs." I pointed at the scrambled mess on the plate and Eleven looked at them.

"Egg...os?"

"Oh. No, they aren't made of Eggos. They're good, though." I answered her question automatically, like nothing had happened. Then I remembered and I was infuriated again. I grabbed the Eggos out of my pocket and thrust them at her without making eye contact. She hesitated for a minute and then took them from me.

I nudged the plate toward her a couple of inches, along with the extra fork I'd brought down. She watched me, waiting for me to speak again, but I didn't. I grabbed the nearest book, one of the stack I'd offered her, and opened it to a random page. I ignored her completely. I tried to, anyway. I could feel her staring at me, hurt. She still wasn't eating so I pushed the plate toward her without looking up from the page. She gave a tiny sigh and picked up the fork.

We ate in silence.

That afternoon, I went back downstairs to look at Will's drawings. I



didn't say anything to her, even though I knew she wanted me to. Even though I was angry, I was still unwilling to leave her and go back upstairs. I sulked on the couch instead and she sat in her fort. She just watched me silently for awhile, until she realized I wasn't going to talk to her. She started playing with my super-comm, switching the channels back and forth while I looked at his drawings. I still couldn't believe he'd never draw any more. That this was it, all that was left of my friend. I wanted to study each picture, as if he'd left me something more than a drawing. As if he'd left a message, explaining what had happened, and why. As if he'd said goodbye.

I couldn't concentrate because of the feedback from the super-comm. I finally spoke to her. "Can you please stop that?" I said please, but it wasn't a request.

She switched it off instantly. As soon as I looked away from her and back at the drawings, she turned it back on.

"Are you deaf?"

She ignored me this time, which infuriated me. She just looked so calm, sitting over there. Like she didn't have a care in the world. Like she didn't even notice I was in the same room.

"I thought we were friends, you know?"

She looked up at me and quit playing with the super-comm.

"But friends tell each other the truth. And they definitely don't lie to each other."

She didn't say anything, she just watched me sadly.

"You made me think Will was okay, that he was still out there, but he wasn't. He wasn't!"

She dropped her gaze and sighed. She looked close to tears again.

"Maybe you thought you were helping, but you weren't. You hurt me." She looked back up at the word. "Do you understand? What you did sucks." I paused, not wanting to say anything more, and wanting

to say everything. I wanted to hurt her, like she'd hurt me. "Lucas was right about you. All along." I looked away because I regretted the words immediately. I should never have said that. I couldn't take them back, but I didn't want to see the look on her face.

Less than a second later, I heard it. I heard him.

Will.

I heard his voice through the super-comm. He was singing his favorite song. I forgot all about the drawings. I stared at Eleven's bowed head. When she raised her face, I could see her nose was bleeding. Her eyes were still pleading with me. I ran to her and knelt in front of her. She kept her eyes locked on mine, and held out the super-comm like an offering. Like she'd done it so I'd forgive her, even if it hurt her. Even if it made her nose bleed. The idea made me feel like shit, and I regretted my words even more. I stared at the proffered super-comm for a few seconds before taking it from her.

"Will, is that you? It's Mike! Do you copy? Over." I waited, but I couldn't hear anything. He wasn't even singing anymore.

"Will, are you there? Will!"

There was nothing. Just silence. I looked at Eleven. She closed her eyes from the effort of using her powers.

"Was that...was it..." I was almost afraid to say it.

She gave me a tiny smile, almost invisible. "Will."

I stared at her in shock. And then a horrible thought occurred to me. They'd pulled a body out of the water. A body wearing Will's clothes. Maybe she'd channeled his spirit somehow? I didn't know how her powers worked. And how far they extended.

"Is he...is he alive?"

She was confused. She looked at the super-comm and back at me.

"I know, I mean, I heard him. But was that like, his ghost?"

I could tell she didn't know the word and I tried to think of how to explain it. "Is he dead, but still out there somehow? Somewhere?"

Her expression cleared and she shook her head. I exhaled a breath I wasn't aware I was holding and dropped my face into my shaky hands in relief. I just concentrated on breathing in and out, slowly, until she touched my hand tentatively.

I raised my face and looked at her. She was studying me warily, trying to gauge my reaction. The last time she'd tried to touch me, I'd slapped her hand away. She was trying to read my face; to see if she'd upset me. I smiled at her and she smiled back hopefully.

The hope on her face showed me that my opinion mattered to her. She'd never been treated well by other people, until she found me. Until she found us. And my opinion of her meant everything to her for some reason. It definitely cemented my opinion of myself as a piece of shit. I never should have gotten angry with her last night. Even if Will had died, even if she had lied, it would only have been to try to help me.

"I'm sorry," I told her earnestly.

She didn't say anything for a long moment. "Sorry?"

"Yeah. Sorry. It's when, you know, you...well, not necessarily you, but a person, does something stupid or mean and they feel bad about it. They want to take it back. And then they say they're sorry, and the other person forgives them." I paused. "Unless they don't. Unless the other person was a huge asshole or something." Like me, I added to myself.

"Forgive?"

"Yeah. You know, when you still want to be friends, even though someone hurt you, because you know they feel bad about it and they would take it back if they could."

I considered the fact that she might believe she had to forgive me, based on the definition I'd given. And some things were beyond forgiveness. Based on what I'd told her, someone could murder your

whole family and you'd have to forgive them if they felt bad about it later. I amended my definition hastily.

"Although, you don't have to forgive that person, if they did something too horrible and you don't want to be friends anymore. That's okay, too. Either way is okay--"

I would have kept babbling pathetically but she interrupted me.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"Still friends." And she smiled at me.

"Oh. Good." I returned her smile.

"Cool," she added, and I laughed.

I needed the guys. I had to tell them what had happened because it changed everything. I called Lucas first, since he was closer and the signal was better. He thought I wanted to talk about Will's funeral. I almost laughed. Will didn't need a freaking funeral. Will was still alive.

We sat in a circle, watching El switch channels on the super-comm. On one channel, we heard whimpering. That was it. And we'd been at it for almost twenty minutes.

"We keep losing the signal, but you heard it, right?"

"Yeah, I heard a baby," Lucas said.

"What?"

Lucas's voice was curiously gentle. "Mike, you obviously tapped into a baby monitor. It's probably the Blackburn's' next door."

"Uh, did that sound like a baby to you? That was Will!"

Lucas rolled his eyes, the first sign that he was losing patience.

“Mike...”

“Lucas, you don’t understand. He spoke last night. Words! He was singing that weird song that he loves. Even El heard him!”

Lucas’s patience snapped. “Oh, well, if the weirdo heard him, then I guess-“

Dustin cut across the sarcasm before we started yelling at each other.

“Are you sure you’re on the right channel?”

“I don’t think it’s about that. I think, somehow, she’s channeling him.”

Dustin looked pleased. “Like...like Professor X.”

“Yeah.” We grinned at each other happily.

“Are you actually believing this crap?” Lucas snapped at Dustin.

“I don’t know, I mean...do you remember when Will fell off his bike and broke his finger? He sounded a lot like that.”

Lucas looked at both of us in turn. “Did you guys not see what I saw? They pulled Will’s body out of the water. He’s dead!”

Dustin was undeterred. “Well, maybe it’s his ghost. Maybe he’s haunting us.”

“It’s not his ghost,” I said firmly.

“How do you know that?”

“I just do!”

“Then what was in that water?”

“I don’t know! All I know is Will is alive. Will is alive! He’s out there somewhere. All we have to do is find him.”

A silence fell while we all watched El. We hadn’t made any progress. Maybe the signal was too weak, even with her powers enhancing

them.

“This isn’t going to work. We need to get El to a stronger radio.”

Dustin grinned. He looked excited.

“Mr. Clarke’s Heathkit Hamshack!”

“Yeah.” I grinned back.

Lucas clearly didn’t share our enthusiasm. He was determined to be an asshole and bring us back to reality.

“The Heathkit’s at school. There is no way we’re gonna get the weirdo in there without anyone noticing. I mean, look at her.”

We looked at her involuntarily, studying her. She gazed back, startled.

She didn’t look weird to me, except for her hair. Or lack of it. It did make her stand out. And the fact that she was wearing my clothes probably wouldn’t help her blend in, either.

I looked at Dustin.

“Nancy,” we both said.

I took El upstairs while the guys rummaged around in Nancy’s old boxes. Nancy never threw anything out, she just boxed it up and either shoved it into the garage or the basement. Even the dress she wore on picture day in third grade was in a box somewhere.

Eleven sat on Nancy’s bed while I grabbed the makeup of her dresser. I wish I could say it was the first time I’ve ever applied makeup, but it wasn’t. Nancy used to make me help her all the time. She used to explain how to apply everything when she did it herself like I was going to need the tips later. I think she was wishing I’d been her little sister instead. Luckily, she’d have Holly in a couple of years.

Eleven leaned her face in trustingly while I patted her cheeks with the brush. I grinned at the surprised expression on her face and kept going. I didn’t mess with any of the eye stuff, though. Most of the

girls at school didn't wear that stuff. I just needed to make her look a little less pale, because you could tell she'd been kept inside for a long time. Or forever.

I applied the lipstick last, both because it's what Nancy always did, and because it was a lot more awkward. A lot more personal, touching her lips, even if I wasn't actually touching her and the lipstick was. She looked at my own lips while I was doing that and I turned red. I tried to avoid eye contact.

The guys had found a dress in one of the boxes, and an old wig from Nancy's last Halloween costume. We handed her the dress.

"Don't change in front of us!" Dustin's voice broke in terror at the thought.

Lucas and I rolled our eyes. At least we were still on the same page about some things.

"She's not going to change in front of us, dumbass."

Lucas grabbed the wig and held it out for her. He looked slightly less antagonistic, which was a step in the right direction. She didn't take it, though. She just looked at the blonde hair clutched in his hand. She took a step back and regarded us with fear.

"Whose...hair?"

We exchanged a glance and stared at the wig as if seeing it for the first time. Like she was. She probably thought we'd scalped someone for it. Dustin cracked up and I glared at him. I opened my mouth to explain, but Lucas jumped in first.

"It's not real," he told her, without rolling his eyes even once.

"Not real?"

"No. It's just fake hair."

"Like for a costume," I added. "For dressing up."

Dustin's giggles tapered off. "Yeah, people dress up sometimes when

they want to pretend to be someone else.”

El looked at us thoughtfully and accepted the wig. She looked a little excited. She wanted to be someone else.

We waited in the hallway while she changed in Nancy’s room. She stepped out hesitantly, since we were all staring at her. She looked amazing, but I always thought she did.

“Wow,” Dustin said, smiling at her kindly. “She looks...”

“Pretty,” I interrupted. I could feel the guys switch their attention to me and hastily amended, “good. You look pretty good.”

Eleven approached the mirror and I followed, ignoring Dustin’s knowing grin. El looked taken aback at her appearance. She was taking it so seriously. I wondered if she’d ever had hair before? If the Bad Men had ever let her.

“Pretty,” she whispered. “Good.”

We were as ready as we’d ever be. We rode to school, El riding behind me. I gave her my jacket because she was shivering. It wasn’t a big deal, I had another one. I glanced back a couple of times to make sure her wig was secure. She was staring at the center of Hawkins in awe, like it was the most beautiful city she’d ever seen. I knew she hadn’t seen it before. I wondered again where she’d come from, and why.

We went in the side door, the closest door to the AV room. We thought we could sneak in without anyone noticing. We passed a poster for the upcoming Snow Ball and I slowed a little. Dustin noticed me glancing at it and he grinned at me, looking between me and Eleven. He raised his eyebrows and I turned red. I couldn’t deny that I’d been thinking about it, though. Maybe she’d want to go with me, once this was over. I looked away from him and picked up the pace.

“Okay, remember. If anyone sees us, look sad.”

Dustin and Lucas both pulled sad faces at El to demonstrate. Dustin closed his hands into fists and mimed crying. She mimed it right back



at him and Lucas gave her a thumbs-up. I was glad the hostility seemed to be over with, although it wasn't.

I heard the announcement for a memorial in the gym. I figured it made our chances even better to sneak in and out unnoticed. I tried the door, but it was locked. I hit the door, as if that would help.

"It's locked," I said, stating the obvious.

"What?" Lucas asked in dismay, trying the knob himself.

"Hey, do you think you can open it?" Dustin asked El. Eleven turned to him. "With your powers?"

I wondered why I hadn't thought of that. If she could lock a door, of course she could unlock one.

We didn't get a chance to try. Mr. Clarke came around the corner just then.

Scott stops reading, glancing up in surprise because he remembers that day. It was a horrible day, and it's permanently etched into his memory. The first student he'd ever lost, even though Will hadn't actually died.

Scott checks the clock above the TV and sees it's still early. Early enough to continue without feeling too guilty about it, anyway.

"Boys?"

We all snapped around to look at him.

Lucas tried to pretend he hadn't been attempting to break into the AV room. He flattened himself against the door and grinned casually. "Hey."

"Assembly's about to start."

“We know. We’re just, you know...” I looked down, trying to look as depressed as possible.

“Upset,” Lucas added, grinning. I gave him a look and he immediately frowned and looked down, too.

“Yeah, definitely upset,” Dustin stammered.

“We need some alone time,” I said.

“To...cry,” Dustin finished for me.

Mr. Clarke looked at us so sympathetically; I think I can speak for all of us when I say we felt like shit for lying to him.

“Listen,” he told us kindly. “I get it, I do. I know how hard this is, but let’s just be there for Will, huh?”

Lucas nodded somberly, and Dustin mimicked him.

“And then...”Mr. Clarke pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and tossed them to me. “...the Heathkit is all yours for the rest of the day. What do you say?”

Yep. We definitely felt like shit.

Mr. Clarke finally noticed El.

“I don’t believe we’ve met. What’s your name?” He smiled at her.

Shit. We hadn’t planned for this. Why hadn’t we planned for this? We all turned to look at El. El looked taken aback at the sudden attention.

“Eleven-“ she started, but I raised my voice and spoke over her, panicking.

“Eleanor! She’s my, uh...”

“Cousin!” Lucas cried.

“Second cousin,” Dustin amended.

I sighed. Thanks, guys. That would kind of make the Snow Ball awkward, assuming she wanted to go. With me. “She’s here for Will’s funeral.”

Mr. Clarke smiled. It was a sad smile. “Ah, well. Welcome to Hawkins Middle School, Eleanor. I wish you were here under better circumstances.”

El glanced around at us to see if we’d speak for her. We didn’t, because he was looking at her and expected her reply.

“Thank you,” she said carefully.

Mr. Clarke paused, regarding her. “Uh, where are you from, exactly?”

Three sets of eyes darted toward Eleven nervously.

Eleven shook her head mournfully and gazed up at him with huge eyes. “Bad place-“

It was the most information we’d ever gotten out of her, but we couldn’t let her continue.

“Sweden!” Dustin interjected loudly.

“I have a lot of Swedish family.”

“She hates it there,” Dustin added.

“Cold!” Lucas said emphatically, nodding his head frantically.

“Subzero,” Dustin finished.

Mr. Clarke gave them an odd glance but didn’t question us any further. “Shall we?”

“Yep!” Lucas said, practically springing away from the door.

Dustin opened the door to the gym first. Everyone in the school was packed in there. And they all turned to look at us. Dustin attempted to escape immediately.

“Abort,” he whispered.

Lucas caught him and shoved him forward. I followed with Eleven. Her mouth was open and she was staring, wide-eyed, around the room. It was probably the most crowded place she'd ever been. I sat next to her and patted her on the shoulder. She gave me a tentative smile.

I didn't really listen to the principal's speech. It was pointless, because Will was alive. I did, however, pay attention to the people crying. People who'd never spoken to Will, never even learned his name. They were crying like they'd lost their best friend. Almost everyone looked somber, except for Troy and James. Of course. They were snickering and mimicking the principal. Assholes. They kept getting louder and louder, until we were all glaring at them.

It didn't even matter that we knew Will was still alive. They didn't. What kind of assholes would find that funny? Eleven leaned past me to stare at them.

"Mouth breather," she said flatly.

I looked at her in surprise and she watched me calmly. Somehow she knew that they had been the ones to trip me.

After the assembly, I could stop myself. I followed Troy and James.

"Hey! Hey! Hey, Troy! Hey, Troy!" Troy finally heard me. He turned around and looked at me incredulously.

"You...you think this is funny?"

Lucas and Dustin lurked behind me. They didn't try to stop me, but they were staying out of it. Eleven stayed right beside me.

"What'd you say, Wheeler?"

"I saw you guys laughing over there. And I think that's a real messed up thing to do."

James smirked at me.

"Didn't you listen to the counselor, Wheeler? Grief shows itself in funny ways."

“Besides, what’s there to be sad about, anyway? Will’s in fairyland now, right? Flying around with all the other little fairies. All happy and gay,” Troy added.

They both laughed before turning around. We had an audience now. Kids can sense when a fight’s imminent, even if teachers can’t.

I could feel El’s eyes on me, waiting to see what I’d do. I wasn’t really sure what I was going to do, until I did it. I ran after Troy and shoved him as hard as I could. He fell face-first onto the floor. The face he turned toward me was murderous, but I didn’t give a shit.

“You’re dead, Wheeler! Dead!”

He lunged for me.

He tried to, anyway.

He froze, mid-lunge, in an impossible pose. I could see the fear and confusion on his face. He couldn’t move. I gawked at him. Then I noticed something else.

He was pissing himself.

I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. Eddie, a guy from our English class, gleefully announced it to the spectators and they all roared with laughter. I could hear Lucas and Dustin giggling.

Troy’s face shook with the effort to free himself. I ignored him. I turned around to look at El. She was staring at me, nose bleeding. She smiled. She wiped her nose and spun around, leaving the gym.

Finally, the principal noticed that something was happening. Adults are really blind sometimes. Lucas grabbed me and we ran for it. Lucas and Dustin were still giggling. Even El laughed before we made it to the AV room.

“That was awesome,” Dustin said gleefully. That was like, the best thing that’s happened all year. Could you do it again tomorrow?”

We all laughed while I dug the keys out of my pocket. I tossed them to Lucas and he unlocked the door.

Eleven's eyes closed as she focused on the radio. She didn't seem to notice or care that we were all hovering and staring at her.

"She's doing it. She's finding him!"

"This is crazy," Dustin said. He sounded awed.

"Calm down. She just closed her eyes," Lucas said.

The light went out right then, the bulb exploded. We all gasped and jumped backward.

"Holy-" Dustin started. He fell silent, because we could all hear a clanging from the radio. We leaned in toward her. The clanging was louder.

"What is that?"

Before we could reply, we heard Will's voice.

"Mom!"

"Will!"

It was Mrs. Byers. How had she known he was alive? How was she talking to him?

"No way!" Lucas cried.

We heard Will asking for help, and Mrs. Byers shouting his name. Will sounded terrified and it panicked us.

"Will! Will, it's us! Are you there?" Lucas shouted.

"Can you hear us? We're here!" Dustin screamed.

Will couldn't hear us. I didn't know why. He could only hear his mom.

"Why can't he hear us?" Lucas asked in frustration.

"I don't know!"

We could hear everything. Mrs. Byers said his name as if she could see him. Then we heard something. We heard it. It was growling.

“Mom, it’s coming!”

We looked at each other in horror.

“Tell me where you are! How do I get you?”

We all leaned closer to the radio, as if we could help him.

Will’s voice, when it came, was echoing through the radio. “It’s like home, but it’s so dark...it’s so dark and empty and it’s cold! Mom? Mom!” Will was crying. He wasn’t the only one. Dustin was crying, too. We were all either crying or close to tears, except for Eleven. She was in the room with us but she also wasn’t. She was somewhere else, concentrating.

Her nose was bleeding again.

We listened to Mrs. Byers, crying that she would get him. She would find him and bring him home. She told him to hide. She’d heard the growling, too. She knew about the monster.

“Mom, please!”

We were all crying at the terror in our friend’s voice, because we could still hear the growling. And it was louder. Closer. I remembered my nightmare. I didn’t want to see or hear it get Will.

“Run! Run!” Mrs. Byers screamed it over and over again until the monster screeched. Lucas jumped. We all did. What had happened? Did it get him?

At that moment, the supposedly indestructible and very expensive Heathkit Hamshack burst into flames.

We felt really, really bad about that, by the way. We still do.

Dustin grabbed my arm as the fire alarm sounded but I didn’t move. I was staring at the radio. He let go and ran for the fire extinguisher, before we could even process what had happened. He put out the fire

while we stood around uselessly.

Eleven hadn't stood up yet. She hadn't seemed to notice the fire or the smoke or the alarm. I turned her chair around to look at her.

She looked awful. We were getting used to the nosebleeds, but this was something else. She was so pale; we could see all the dark veins in her face. She looked like she was dying.

"El, are you okay?"

"Oh!" Lucas exclaimed, seeing her.

El didn't respond, she just stared at me. She was breathing heavily and having trouble keeping her eyes open. Lucas shoved his way beside me, staring at her in concern.

"Can you move?" I asked her.

She didn't respond. I don't think she could even hear me.

Lucas and I exchanged glances.

"Here, help her up!"

I grabbed her by the arm and Lucas got her other side. We pulled her out of the chair. She didn't move. We dragged her until Dustin could get her legs. We needed to get out of there, quick. We found a chair with wheels and sat her carefully into it. Dustin and I got the jacket off of her and I threw it in her lap, covering her up just in case since she was wearing a dress. Lucas rolled her down the hall, running behind her. I stayed beside her, to make sure she didn't slip out of the chair. We trundled her down the hallway and out the door and when the sidewalk ended, we heaved her up again. We pulled her into a copse of trees, away from the doors. We couldn't carry her, and I didn't think she'd be able to stay on the bike.

We looked at each other, open-mouthed. We hadn't expected that. Nothing like that. I took off my jacket and rolled it into a ball to make it into a half-assed pillow and I moved it under her head. Dustin covered her with the other jacket. Lucas, the most logical one of us, grabbed her wrist and checked her pulse. His strained face



relaxed a little.

“I think she’s okay. She’s just drained.” He gently let go of her wrist.

“El? Can you hear me?”

I patted her shoulder but she didn’t open her eyes. In the sunlight, we could see her face even better. We wished we couldn’t because it was ghastly. It looked transparent. I’d never seen anyone look like that before.

“El!”

“Mike?” Her voice sounded muzzy, unfocused. She sounded a little like my uncle Mark, whenever he gets drunk at Christmas.

“Yeah. I’m here. Are you okay?”

She didn’t respond, she just weakly held out her hand to me. I grabbed it. It was so cold. I looked up at Lucas and Dustin.

“Guys,” I started, but they already knew what I wanted.

“On it,” Dustin said, removing his own jacket and piling it on her. Lucas followed suit.

“She’s going to be okay,” Lucas repeated. His rancor was gone. For now. He looked as anxious as I felt.

“Jesus. Did you hear Will? Where is he? How did he get there?” Dustin flattened his hat on his head fretfully.

We looked at each other bleakly. We didn’t know the answer to that. And we didn’t know the answer to his other question, either. The one he wanted to ask, but couldn’t.

How do we get him back?

## 7. Chapter 7

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

A couple of hours later, Eleven was strong enough to sit up and her hands weren't cold anymore. We carefully got her back to my house. She was ravenous. I sent Dustin upstairs to get something for her to eat. Everyone was home but they were all used to the guys helping themselves. She wanted Eggos but Dustin brought her dinner. Brought dinner for all of us, actually. He handed us an entire casserole dish of lasagna, looking triumphant. It hadn't even been touched.

"Uh."

I finally noticed that he was still wearing oven mitts.

"Did you take that out of the oven?"

"Yep! It's nice and hot." He beamed at us.

"Jesus," Lucas muttered.

"What?"

"Dustin, you idiot. You can't just take the whole freaking thing."

"Why not? El really needs it!"

"Uh, well, for starters, I think Mike's mom will probably come looking for it. Considering everyone upstairs is probably fucking

hungry, too, and their dinner just walked off.”

“Oh.” Dustin paused for a second. “So I should bring it back upstairs?”

“Yes!” I snapped, then reconsidered.

“Actually, no. Go get some plates. And silverware. That way we don’t have to sneak a plate down later.”

“Okay.”

Dustin sat the dish on the floor and ran for the stairs.

Lucas and I looked at each other.

“And get some breadsticks!” Lucas yelled.

“On it!”

Dustin didn’t look back.

Once we were finished eating, Eleven stretched out on the couch. She still looked tired, but she was a lot less pale. I sat next to her while Dustin collected the plates and brought them back upstairs.

I tapped my fingers impatiently because he was taking forever. We needed to get down to business now. When he came back empty-handed, I realized he’d just brought up four dirty plates.

“Was my mom up there?”

“Yep. I told her dinner was great. As usual.”

“How did you explain the extra plate?” Lucas asked. He’d noticed our mistake, too.

“Oh. I just told her I was really hungry.”

We stared at him.

“What? All that crying and grief and stuff. That’s why people make like, a shit-ton of food when someone dies. It makes you hungry.”

I gave up. We didn't have time for this. We needed to figure out the riddle.

"What was Will saying? Like home...like home. But...dark?"

I stood up to pace around the room.

"And empty," Lucas added.

"Empty and cold. Wait, did he say cold?"

"I don't know. The stupid radio kept going in and out," Lucas grumbled. I rolled my eyes.

Dustin leaned his head back to look at the ceiling. "It's like riddles in the dark."

"Like home. Like his house?" I remembered, very well, how El had led us to his house. Right before I'd yelled at her.

"Or maybe like Hawkins!" Lucas exclaimed.

Eleven had turned over to watch us. She cradled a hand under her face. She finally spoke. "Upside down."

We stopped talking to look at her and I finally stopped pacing.

"What'd she say?" Lucas asked.

Eleven didn't answer; she just looked at me, to see if I understood. I did. I glanced involuntarily at the board and then back at her. She nodded.

"Upside down."

"What?"

"Upside down!" I pulled my hands out of my pockets and reached for the board. "When El showed us where Will was, she flipped the board over, remember?" I demonstrated and the guys came up behind me.

I flipped it over again, to the black side. "Upside down. Dark. Empty."

Lucas stared at me blankly for a second and then looked at Dustin. "Do you understand what he's talking about?"

"Uh, no."

"Guys, come on. Think about it. When El took us to find Will, she took us to his house, right?"

"Yeah. And he wasn't there," Lucas grumbled.

"But what if he was there? What if we just couldn't see him? What if he was on the other side?" I turned the board over again. "What if this is Hawkins, and..." I turned the board over. "this is where Will is? The Upside Down."

Dustin looked excited. "Like the Vale of Shadows!"

"Yes! Exactly!"

"I have no idea what you two are talking about," Lucas told us both. Dustin sighed. I grabbed my manual and Dustin practically yanked it away from me. He flipped the sheets frantically until he found the right page.

"The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. It is right next to you, and you don't even see it."

We looked at each other. Lucas didn't scoff. And he sure as hell didn't roll his eyes this time.

"An alternate dimension," I said.

"But...how...do we get there?" Lucas asked us. There was no disbelief in his voice.

"You cast Shadow Walk," Dustin replied immediately.

Lucas finally rolled his eyes. "In real life, dummy," he snapped.

"We can't shadow walk, but..." Dustin turned to look at El. "...maybe she can."

“Do you know how we get there? To the Upside Down?”

She didn’t meet my eyes. She gave a tiny shake of her head. No.

Lucas threw his head back in exasperation and sighed. “Oh, my God!”

Eleven didn’t respond. I finally noticed that she was still wearing her wig. She loved that damned thing, loved how normal it made her feel.

“Well, at least we’re getting somewhere,” Dustin said optimistically.

“We’re getting nowhere. Fast.”

I sat down on the couch again. Eleven pulled her feet up at the same time to give me some room. I leaned my head back and tuned out the bickering. I turned my head to El, she was watching me.

“You feeling any better?”

She nodded.

“She’s feeling like she needs dessert, right, El?” Dustin called cheerfully from the table.

“Seriously?” Lucas asked.

“Dessert?” El looked at me for an explanation.

“It’s what you eat after dinner. Like candy or ice cream or whatever. But we don’t need dessert right now.”

“Or fudge,” Dustin added.

“Yes, Dustin, or fudge, but we don’t need...wait, did my mom make fudge?”

“Yep. I told you. Grief makes you want to eat.”

I looked at Lucas for a second, then back at Dustin. I opened my mouth.

“I’m on it,” Dustin said, standing up again.

El loved the fudge. She licked her fingers after eating it and looked disappointed when our little plate was empty.

“Here,” I said, giving her my last piece. Lucas rolled his eyes again. I was pretty sure they’d eventually fall out, since he’d been doing it so much lately. El took the piece from me and held it in the palm of her hand. She looked at the empty plate again, then back at the piece of fudge. She frowned a little and it broke evenly in two. She handed me half of it and ate the other half.

“Thanks,” I told her, and she smiled.

“Awesome!” Dustin breathed.

I’ll let you guess what Lucas did.

El went back to her fort when the guys left. She looked exhausted, and I realized she hadn’t been fully recharged. Maybe she needed to sleep to do that. I went over to check on her.

“I’m okay,” she said before I could even ask. I laughed.

“Okay. Good night. You want me to leave the light on?”

“Trolls.”

“Huh?”

“Trolls,” she repeated, watching me.

“Oh! You want me to read to you?”

She nodded and looked at me hopefully. I grinned at her. I stretched out on the floor and reached for *The Hobbit*.

We had to leave El alone the next day. It was the day of Will’s funeral.

I brought her breakfast and some juice while my parents were getting ready. While she ate, I grabbed a stack of clean clothes I’d washed. The yellow shirt from Benny’s was on top.

“Hey. Here are your clean clothes, if you wanted to change.” I sat the sweats down on the table and picked up the shirt. “And you can have this back.” I’d washed it separately, so my mom wouldn’t see it. I held it out for her but she didn’t take it. She just stared at it before turning her head away.

“No.”

“No?”

“Don’t like it.”

“Oh.” I unfolded it and looked at it. I’d heard what had happened to Benny. He’d killed himself. It was weird, because he was always in a good mood. He always gave us free dessert whenever we came in. He’d shot himself the same day we found Eleven.

I remembered the way she’d illustrated the danger we were in. She’d mimed shooting us both.

“Were you...there? At Benny’s?”

Her face darkened and she looked away. I didn’t think she’d respond, but she finally nodded.

“What happened?”

She was quiet for a long time.

“Bad.”

I knew what she meant, and I didn’t know what to say to that. That was fucking horrible. He’d tried to help her and they’d killed him for it.

I folded the shirt back up and set it aside.

“Well. You can change back into the sweats if you want?” I had another thought. “Actually, we’re all going to be gone for awhile, because of the funeral. You could go upstairs when we leave and take a bath if you wanted.”



Her startled eyes met mine and I blinked at her, confused.

“Bath?”

I was used to her repeating words that she didn’t know, but this was different. She looked afraid and I didn’t know why.

“Um. Yeah. You know, to get clean? Or you could take a shower?”

She relaxed again and nodded. She knew what that word meant. I handed her the clean clothes and she took them.

“I’ve gotta go get ready, we’ll be back in a few hours, okay?”

She nodded and I started to walk away. I stopped and turned back to her. I knelt in front of her and touched her wrist, the one with my watch. She looked at my hand.

“When the numbers read 1-2-0-0,” you can go upstairs, okay?” We’d be gone by then.

She nodded again and I let go of her wrist.

“Okay. I’ll be back later.”

I looked at her again before I’d made it a couple of steps up the stairs. I felt bad for leaving her alone down here for so long. I hoped she wouldn’t be bored. There were plenty of books but I wasn’t sure how well she could read. I wished we had a TV down there so she could at least have something to do, but I knew that my parents definitely wouldn’t go for that.

The funeral was surreal.

Even though we knew he was alive, we also knew he might not be. Not for very much longer. It felt like an ill omen to be there, watching the casket that could easily have held our friend. We tried to talk to Mrs. Byers, but she looked distracted and we gave up. Everyone was there. Dustin grinned and nudged me. Jennifer Hayes was crying. Will’s always had a crush on her.

“Just wait until we tell Will Jennifer Hayes was crying at his funeral.”

We grinned until my mom shushed us. Luckily, she didn't actually hear him.

We were excited, but we tried to mask it as well as we could. We couldn't hide it completely, though. We were too eager. We had a plan. Eleven might not have known how to get to the Upside Down, but we knew someone else that might. Someone who always had the answers to any question we could come up with.

We approached him at the refreshment table. I shuddered inwardly. It was pretty gruesome, actually, to have a refreshment table set up after a funeral. Like we were at a freaking party and would care about cookies and sandwiches. Judging from the long line, though, I guessed Dustin was right. Grief made people hungry.

"Mr. Clarke?"

Mr. Clarke turned around.

"Oh, hey there," he said, smiling.

Dustin reached for a handful of cookies.

"How are you boys holding up?" Mr. Clarke looked sympathetic. Lucas and I tried to look as gloomy as possible.

"We're...in...mourning," Lucas answered robotically.

"Man, these aren't real Nilla wafers!"

We both looked at Dustin in dismay and I jumped in quickly.

"We were wondering if you had time to talk?"

"We have some questions," Lucas added.

"A lot of questions," I said.

Dustin chewed the faux nilla wafers morosely but didn't say anything. Mr. Clarke agreeably sat down with us and I began immediately. No time to lose.

“So, you know how in Cosmos, Carl Sagan talks about other dimensions? Like, beyond our world?”

Mr. Clarke nodded. “Yeah, sure. Theoretically.”

“Right, theoretically.”

Lucas interrupted. “So, theoretically, how do we travel there?”

“You guys have been thinking about Hugh Everett’s Many-Worlds interpretation, haven’t you?”

Um. I guess.

I shrugged noncommittally and Mr. Clarke smiled.

“Well, basically, there are parallel universes.” Mr. Clarke fell into his teaching voice. “Just like our world, but just infinite variations of it.” He smiled at us gently. “Which means there’s a world out there where none of this tragic stuff ever happened.”

I could practically feel Lucas holding in an eye roll.

“Yeah, that’s not what we’re talking about,” he said bluntly.

“Oh.”

“We were thinking of more of an evil dimension, like the Vale of Shadows,” Dustin explained hopefully. “You know the Vale of Shadows?”

“An echo of the Material Plane, where necrotic and shadow magic-“

Dustin beamed and nodded.

“Yeah, exactly,” I interrupted. “If that did exist, a place like the Vale of Shadows, how would we travel there?”

“Theoretically,” Lucas added.

“Well...”

Mr. Clarke looked around for something to demonstrate with. He

grabbed his plates and separated them, holding up the empty one. He reached into his coat pocket for a pen and started scribbling.

“Picture...an acrobat...standing on a tightrope. Now, the tightrope is our dimension. And our dimension has rules. You can move forwards, or backwards.” He drew a line on the plate. “But, what if, right next to our acrobat, there is a flea? Now the flea can also travel back and forth, just like the acrobat. Right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

“Here’s where things get really interesting,” Mr. Clarke said, eyes shining. “The flea can also travel this way...along the side of the rope. He can even go...underneath the rope.”

“Upside Down,” we said in unison.

“Exactly.”

“But-we’re not the flea. We’re the acrobat.”

“In this metaphor, yes. We’re the acrobat.”

“So, we can’t go upside down?” Lucas asked.

Mr. Clarke shook his head. “No.”

“Well, is there any way for the acrobat to get to the Upside Down?” Dustin asked.

Mr. Clarke wrinkled his forehead in thought.

“Well, you’d have to create a massive amount of energy. More than humans are currently capable of creating, mind you, to open up some kind of tear in time and space, and then...” He folded the paper plate in half and stabbed it with the pen.

“You create a doorway.”

“Like a gate?”

“Sure. Like a gate.”

Mr. Clarke raised his hand, because we looked excited.

“But again, this is all-“

“Theoretical,” Lucas finished, nodding.

“But...what if this gate already existed?”

“Well, if it did, I...I think we’d know. It would disrupt gravity, the magnetic field, our environment. Heck, it might even swallow us up whole.”

We looked at each other gravely.

“Science is neat, but I’m afraid it’s not very forgiving,” Mr. Clarke finished.

We were silent for a few seconds.

“Thanks, Mr. Clarke,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks. That was awesome,” Dustin enthused.

“Really helpful,” Lucas added.

We made meaningless small talk for a few minutes. Finally, Dustin pointed at a crowd of people at the door.

“Mike! It’s your mom.”

“What?”

Lucas got the hint faster than I did.

“She’s waving. See? I guess she’s ready to leave. We’d better go, too,” Lucas told me, staring at me intently.

“Oh. Right. Thanks again, Mr. Clarke.”

Mr. Clarke gathered up his plates.

“Anytime, boys.”

Half an hour later, we were back at my house. I sent the guys downstairs and quickly ran to check the bathroom, to make sure there was no sign of Eleven. She'd folded her towel carefully and left it on the counter. I grabbed it and threw it in the laundry hamper so my mom wouldn't notice before running back downstairs.

I stifled a laugh when I got back to the basement. She'd showered, but she'd changed back into the dress. And she'd put her wig back on.

They were all silent. Dustin was being unusually quiet, he was pacing the room.

I sat next to El on the couch and demonstrated what Mr. Clarke had told us with a sheet of notebook paper and pencil.

"It would take a lot of energy to build a gate like this. But that's gotta be what happened. Otherwise, how did Will get there, right?"

"Right," El said quietly.

"What we want to know is, do you know where the gate is?" Lucas interrupted.

Dustin finally stopped pacing, but El shook her head.

Lucas was exasperated.

"Then how do you know about the Upside Down?"

I looked at El, because it was a good question. I hadn't thought about it before. Eleven avoided my gaze. She looked down at her lap.

Dustin started pacing again. Lucas and I both watched him.

"Dustin, what are you doing?"

He didn't answer. He didn't even hear me.

"Dustin. Dustin!"

"Dustin!" Lucas yelled irritably.

Dustin finally looked around. We could see the eagerness in his face.

“I need to see your compasses.”

“What?”

“Your compasses! All of your compasses, right now!”

We hastened to obey, because he sounded frantic with excitement. We dumped them on the board and Dustin examined each one thoroughly.

“What’s exciting about this?”

“Well, they’re all facing north, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, that’s not true north.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I just said. That’s not true north.”

Lucas and I stared blankly down at the compasses.

Dustin sighed.

“Are you both seriously this dense?”

Lucas shrugged, baffled.

Dustin’s tone indicated he was speaking to a not very bright five year old. He explained it as slowly as possible.

“The sun rises in the east, and sets in the west. Right? Which means, that’s true north,” he said, pointing.

“So what you’re saying is, the compasses are broken?” I asked.

Dustin sighed and leaned over, putting both hands on the table as if we were exhausting him with our idiocy.

“Do you even understand how a compass works? Do you see a battery pack on this?”

He twirled it in front of my face.

“No.”

“No, you don’t. Because it doesn’t need one. The needle’s naturally drawn to the Earth’s magnetic North Pole.”

“So, what’s wrong with them?”

“Well, that’s what I couldn’t figure out, but then I remembered. You can change the direction of a compass with a magnet. If there’s the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power. And then I remembered what Mr. Clarke said. The gate would have so much power...”

“It would disrupt the electromagnetic field,” I finished. I smiled at Dustin.

“Exactly.”

“Meaning, if we follow the compasses’ north...”

“They should lead us straight to the gate,” Dustin said.

Lucas clapped him on the back and Dustin grinned.

None of us noticed the look of horror on Eleven’s face.

We left immediately, while we still had daylight. We already had our supplies in our backpacks. We walked the railroad tracks, following the compasses north. Lucas and Dustin led the way. El and I followed further behind.

El seemed really worn-out. I tried talking to her but she kept her sentences even shorter than usual, so eventually we walked in silence. Eleven’s breathing was heavy. I didn’t think she was fully recovered from using the radio. She stopped suddenly, grabbing my arm and startling me.

“Mike.”

“Yeah?”



“Turn back.”

I looked at her in surprise.

“What? Why?”

“I’m tired.”

Her reply came quickly. Too quickly. The lack of a pause should have given me pause. I didn’t notice. I sighed instead.

“Look, I’m sure we’re almost there. Just hold on a little longer, okay?”

She stopped walking, looking behind us. Looking back the way we’d came. I walked slower until she caught up with me again.

What felt like hours later, we ended up in the junk yard, still following Dustin. When he stopped and glanced around, we all halted.

“Oh, no.”

“‘Oh no?’ What’s ‘oh no?’” Lucas asked.

“We’re headed back home.”

“What?” I asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Setting sun, right there. We looped right back around.” Dustin turned in a circle, examining his compass.

“And you’re just realizing this now?” Lucas snapped.

It was a good question.

“Why is this all on me?”

“Because you’re the compass genius!”

Dustin sighed and looked at his compass.

“What do yours say?”

We both looked down.

“North,” Lucas and I said in unison. Shit.

Dustin glanced around in irritation.

“This makes no damn sense.”

“Maybe the gate moved,” I suggested.

“Nah, I don’t think it’s the gate. I think it’s something else screwing with the compasses.”

“Maybe it’s something here,” I said, looking around at the junked-out cars.

“Nah, it has to be, like, a super magnet.”

I shrugged. I had no idea.

Lucas, however, turned around immediately to face El. He jabbed his finger at her.

“It’s not a magnet. She’s been acting weirder than normal! If she can slam doors with her mind, she can definitely screw up a compass!”

I glared at him.

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“Because she’s trying to sabotage our mission. Because she’s a traitor!” And he stalked toward her. She shrank away from him.

“Lucas, what are you doing?” I snapped, running after him. He was getting way out of line.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Lucas asked her, disgusted. The animosity was unleashed. El bit her lip and stared at him nervously. “You don’t want us to reach the gate. You don’t want us to find Will.”

“Lucas, come on. Seriously. Just leave her alone!”

Lucas ignored me.

“Admit it.”

“No,” El said in a tiny voice.

“ADMIT IT!” Lucas shouted, right in her face. He grabbed her roughly by the arm and raised it slightly, to show the inside of her jacket. It was covered in blood. He pushed her arm away from him angrily.

“Fresh blood. I knew it.”

“Lucas, come on!”

“I saw her wiping her nose on the tracks! She was using her powers!”

“Bull! That’s old blood, right El?”

El looked at me tearfully, but didn’t respond.

“Right, El?” I prompted, more emphatically.

She started to cry and my heart sank.

“It’s...not...it’s not safe.”

Lucas and I turned on each other while Dustin hovered uncertainly. Usually he and Lucas were the ones to bicker with each other. And never with any real anger.

“What did I tell you? She’s been playing us from the beginning!”

“That’s not true! She helped us find Will!”

“Find...Will? Find Will? Where is he, then? Huh? I don’t see him,” Lucas snapped, making a big show of looking around.

“Yeah, you know what I mean.”

“No, I actually don’t. Just think about it, Mike. She could’ve just told us where the Upside Down was right away, but she didn’t. She just made us run around like headless chickens.”

Dustin finally tried to break us up. He grabbed us both.

“All right, calm down!”

“No!” Lucas slapped his arm away. “She used us, all of us! She helped just enough so she could get what she wants. Food and a bed.” He made those necessities sound like something horrible. “She’s like a stray dog.”

I snapped. That was enough. She was right there, listening. Listening and crying.

“Screw you, Lucas!”

“No, screw you, Mike!” Lucas jabbed a finger in my face. “You’re blind; blind because you like that a girl’s not grossed out by you. But wake up, man. Wake the hell up! She knows where Will is. And now, she’s just letting him die in the Upside Down.”

“Shut up!” I screamed.

“For all we know, it’s her fault.

“Shut..up.”

“We’ve been looking for some stupid monster...”

Lucas pushed me roughly as he spoke.

“...But did you ever stop to think that maybe she’s the monster?”

We all looked at El. Right. A monster. Lucas was insane to even think it. To think that of a crying 11 or 12 year old girl in a dirty pink dress.

“I said shut up!” I screamed the words, lunging at Lucas. I grabbed him and threw him to the ground.

“Stop!” El cried.

“Knock it off, you idiots,” Dustin shouted.

Lucas tried to seize my shoulder to get the upper hand. We rolled on the grass, scuffling.

“Stop it!”

“Mike, get off!”

Lucas jumped on top of me.

“Stop it!” El shouted. When that didn’t work, when Lucas raised his fist to hit me, she forgot the words. She just screamed. It was a piercing sound, an unnerving sound. It seemed to last for minutes. It echoed across the yard. Before she’d finished screaming, Lucas was ripped off of me. He flew backward across the yard, hitting his head hard. He slumped over and didn’t move.

Shit.

“Jesus!” Dustin screamed, running toward him. I pulled myself up out of the dirt and ran after him, panicking. He’d hit his head so hard. What if he was dead?

“Lucas! Lucas! Lucas, are you all right?”

Dustin grabbed for his wrist to feel his pulse.

“Lucas. Lucas, come on!”

“Lucas, wake up!”

“Come on, Lucas!” Dustin shook him lightly but Lucas didn’t move.

I turned to Eleven and glared at her. It was like I was seeing her for the first time, but in a completely different light. And I knew she wasn’t the monster. I never thought that, never thought anything like that. I knew she hadn’t meant to hurt him. But I also knew she was dangerous. Especially since it had been an accident.

“Why would you do that?”

She was crying.

And I said it again, the thing I had regretted.

“What’s wrong with you? What is wrong with you?”

I turned away from the broken look on her face because I couldn't think about that right now. I couldn't think about her right now. I shook Lucas.

"Lucas. Lucas, come on."

Lucas stirred and Dustin laughed in relief.

"Lucas," I gasped.

Lucas struggled to sit up.

"Lucas, you okay?"

He didn't say anything, and Dustin held out a hand in front of his face.

"Lucas...Lucas. How many fingers am I holding up? Lucas, how many fingers?"

Lucas didn't answer and Dustin and I looked at each other in alarm.

"Let me see your head," I said, extending a hand. Lucas slapped it away angrily.

"Get off of me!"

"Just...Lucas. Lucas, let me see."

Lucas stood up slowly and I touched his arm. He slapped that away, too.

"Get off of me!"

He started walking away without looking at either of us. I tried to run after him, but Dustin held me back.

"Let him go," he said.

I did. Lucas didn't look back.

Dustin let go of me and I sighed, near tears.

I looked around for El. I needed to apologize. Again. I knew she didn't mean to hurt him. She was trying to stop us from fighting. She was trying to protect me.

She was gone.

"Where is El?"

Dustin looked over to where she'd been standing. He shook his head. Neither of us had seen her leave, we'd been too focused on Lucas.

"El! El!"

"Eleven!" Dustin shouted.

"El! Eleven! Eleven!"

We looked everywhere. We retraced our steps, but we couldn't find her. Dustin tried to stay positive because I was freaking out. It was getting dark. And she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, as far as I knew. I never should have yelled at her.

"She's probably like, back at your house and already in her fort."

I kicked a pebble.

"Maybe."

I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I hoped, anyway. I had to. She'd come back last time. Where else would she go?

Except that she didn't come back. Not that night. I waited all night on the couch in the basement, just in case. I watched the door. I didn't want to think about her, outside and cold. Hungry. Thinking that we hated her. That I hated her.

Now that I knew Lucas was okay, I was angry with him all over again. For not even giving her a chance. For not seeing how scared she was. For not realizing that she'd been through things he couldn't imagine. For treating her like a dog.

But most of all, I was mad at myself.

And then it was morning, and she still hadn't come home.

I looked at her fort. And I suddenly couldn't stand seeing it anymore. I wanted to tear it down. I threw the chairs aside and kicked the blankets out.

"Stupid! Stupid!" I said it every time I kicked. I was crying. Once I'd demolished it, I put it back together again. Just in case. I wanted her to know she could come home.

Dustin biked over later to check on me, and to see if El had come home.

"I just...I can't believe she didn't come back."

"She's gotta be close," he said reassuringly.

"She said it wasn't safe. She just messed up the compasses because she wanted to protect us. She didn't betray us!"

I was pacing.

"Mike, calm down."

"I shouldn't have yelled at her. I never should have done that."

"Mike, this isn't your fault."

"Yeah, it's Lucas's."

"It wasn't his fault, either."

I stopped pacing and stared at him in shock.

"It wasn't his fault?"

"No."

"So you're saying he wasn't way out of line?"

"Totally, but so were you!"

"What?"



“And so was Eleven,” he added.

“Oh, give me a break.”

“No, Mike. You give ME a break. All three of you were being a bunch of little assholes. I was the only reasonable one. But the bottom line is...you pushed first. And you know the rule. You draw first blood...”

“No! No way. I’m not shaking his hand!”

There was no way in hell I was going to apologize. Not until he did.

“You’re shaking his hand.”

“No, I’m not.”

“This isn’t a discussion. This is the Rule of Law. Obey or be banished from the party. Do you wanna be banished?”

I could tell he meant it. Even though there were currently only two people left in the party. He still meant it.

“No,” I told him reluctantly.

“Good.”

Dustin grabbed his jacket.

“Where are we going?”

“Where do you think? We’re going to get Lucas. And then we’re gonna find Eleven.”

He tossed my backpack to me and was out of the basement and halfway next door before I could even pull it on.

Lucas answered the door, already pissed off. Or still pissed off.

“What do you want?”

I didn’t answer. I stared at him sullenly until Dustin smacked me in the chest. I sighed.

“I drew first blood, so...”

I stuck out my hand. Lucas didn't budge. I waited a few seconds, then looked at Dustin for instructions. Dustin looked like he was ready to strangle both of us.

“Lucas.”

“What.”

“Shake his goddamned hand.”

“I'll think about it,” Lucas said mulishly.

I dropped my arm and sighed. I opened my mouth to snap at him but Dustin shoved me, accidentally-on-purpose, before pushing past Lucas.

“Well, can we all think about it inside the goddamned house? It's cold.”

Lucas grudgingly stepped aside and let us in.

Ten minutes later, Lucas was still pacing while we waited impatiently. He finally turned to me. He still looked irritable.

“Okay, I'll shake.”

About damned time. I stuck out my hand again but Lucas folded his arms.

“On one condition. We forget the weirdo, and go straight to the gate.”

Dustin groaned. I think he was angrier than the two of us combined, but he was trying to hold it together.

“Then the deal's off,” I snapped angrily, withdrawing my hand.

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“No. No! Not fine! Guys, seriously?”

Dustin grabbed me roughly by the shoulder and turned me to face him.

“Do you even remember what happened on the bloodstone pass?”

I shrugged.

“We couldn’t agree on what path to take, so we split up the party, and those trolls took us out one by one! And it all went to shit! And we were all disabled! So we stick together, no matter what!”

“Yeah, I agree,” Lucas said. “But this is the party, right here in this room.”

“El’s one of us now,” I told him. I was not backing down on that.

“Um, no. No, she’s not. Not even close! Never will be. She’s a liar, a traitor-“

I glared at him.

“She was just trying to keep us safe! She didn’t mean to hurt you! It was an accident!”

“An accident?”

“All right, accident or not...admit it, it was a little awesome,” Dustin told him.

Lucas stared at him in disbelief.

“Awesome?”

“Yeah, she threw you in the air, with her mind!”

“I could have been killed!”

We were all shouting at each other. Luckily Lucas’s parents were gone.

“Which is exactly why we need her! She’s a weapon. Do you seriously

want to fight the Demogorgon with your wrist rocket? That's like R2-D2 going to fight Darth Vader! We're no use to Will if we're dead."

Lucas huffed and completely ignored the validity of that argument. For someone who was usually so logical, he was really being a dumbass.

"If you two want to waste your time looking for a traitor, go ahead, but I'm not spending my time on her anymore. No way! I'm going to the gate. I'm gonna find Will."

And Lucas pushed past both of us, making sure to extend his arms and shove us both on his way out.

I stumbled and Dustin steadied me.

"I tried," I told him lamely, because he was glaring at me.

He muttered something under his breath, something that I was pretty glad I couldn't hear, actually.

"Now what?"

"Lucas will come around. Eventually. We need to find Eleven," Dustin said. We both walked out the door and back to my house to grab our bikes.

I started to get on, but Dustin stopped me.

"Wait. Maybe we should check inside again, just in case."

I dropped the bike and hurried inside, but her fort was empty. When I came back out, I shook my head. Dustin sighed.

"Let's go," he said.

"This is weird without Lucas," Dustin said, riding next to me.

"He should have shaken my hand."

"He's just jealous."

"What are you talking about?"

Dustin sighed. "Sometimes, your total obliviousness just like, blows my mind."

I stared at him blankly and he sighed again.

"He's your best friend, right?"

"Yeah...I mean, I don't know."

"It's fine. I get it. I didn't get here until the 4th grade. He had the advantage of living next door. But none of that matters. What matters is that he's your best friend. And then this girl shows up and starts living in your basement, and all you ever want to do is pay attention to her."

"That's not true," I denied automatically.

"Yes, it is. And you know it. And he knows it. But no one ever says anything, until you both start punching and yelling at each other like goblins with intelligence scores of zero. Now everything's weird."

It wasn't true. Well, maybe it was, but Jesus. We'd only known her for a couple of days, and she was in serious danger. I thought that took precedence over Lucas's feelings. Not to mention that he'd been hostile toward her since the very first day. I didn't point that out, though.

"He's not my best friend," I said instead.

"Yeah, right."

"I mean, he is, but so are you. And so is Will."

"You can't have more than one best friend," Dustin said reasonably.

"Says who?"

"Says logic."

"Well, I call bull on your logic, because you're my best friend, too."

Dustin smiled at me and I returned it.

“Okay,” he said, giving up.

We both glanced around for a distraction, because it was starting to get sappy. And we found one immediately. We both braked at the same time, staring at the grocery store.

“Woah,” I said.

“You don’t think...”

“Uh...definitely.”

There were police officers in front of the store, interviewing people. There was a crowd gathered, watching them. The glass doors had been shattered. We rode slowly, closer to the store, staring at the crowd. Dustin hopped off his bike and headed toward them. He chatted up a couple of people, trying to figure out what happened. He came back a couple of minutes later, grinning.

“What?” I asked him.

Dustin chortled.

“There was a robbery.”

“A robbery?”

“Yeah. Get this. Like a dozen boxes of Eggos were stolen.”

That’s all I needed to hear.

We both started giggling.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

We didn't search near the store, because we figured she would have gotten as far away as possible. El was a very cautious person. She had to be, because of what she'd been through. We took the bike path behind the store to the woods. I thought she had to be somewhere in them. It was the best place to stay out of sight. We were heading toward the quarry.

"You've got your super-comm, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"We could split up, cover more ground that way. Literally," Dustin said.

"What about the Bloodstone Pass?" I reminded him.

Dustin sighed.

"Right. We shouldn't split up. Probably just get eaten by monsters."

I surprised him-surprised us both-by laughing.

"Yeah. Probably."

Dustin leaned over and peered behind a couple of tangled bushes, holding his bike upright.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for Eggo boxes. What else would I be doing?”

He straightened up and shook his head.

“Nothing. I thought maybe she’d stop to eat some of them. That’s a lot of fucking Eggos to carry.”

He giggled again but sobered when I glared at him.

“Sorry. But it’s true. Shit. Poor El.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Frozen Eggos. That’s pretty disgusting.”

“We’ll make her something better when we find her.”

Dustin looked around, carefully scanning the trees.

“I think we’re far enough away now,” he told me. A second later he was screeching her name.

“El!”

“Eleven!”

We pushed our bikes slowly, trying to take our time and look for any indication she’d come this way. I was starting to wish we’d just left them at home since we couldn’t ride them even if we’d wanted to.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I’m hungry.”

I sighed. “We’ve only been looking for an hour. She’s got to be close by.”

“I know, I know. I’m not, like, saying we should give up. I just hope she still has some Eggos left when we find her.”



“They’re frozen,” I reminded.

“So? I’m really hungry.”

I didn’t bother to respond.

“E!”

“Eleven!”

Dustin cupped his hands around his mouth and turned slowly in a circle, calling in each direction. I thought I heard something over the yelling. I came to a stop and raised my hand for him to be quiet. He didn’t see me. I walked further away from him, listening. And I heard it again. I heard leaves rustling.

“Hey, stop. Did you hear that?”

Dustin dropped his hands and walked toward me.

“What?”

The dry leaves were still crackling. It wasn’t an animal, something big was moving. Someone was walking toward us. I looked at Dustin in excitement and he shrugged. He hadn’t heard anything.

“E!”

I knew it was her. It had to be. She’d heard us calling and she knew we missed her. She knew we wanted her to come home. A figure slowly climbed the hill across from us and came into view.

Not someone. Two someones. The last people on Earth we’d want to see, actually. Possibly including other dimensions, too. It was Troy and James. What the hell were they doing out here?

We didn’t even think about running. I wish I could say that we’d considered it, but we were both staring at them like a couple of idiots. I didn’t even think about trying to get away. Not then.

“Hey there, Frogface,” Troy said, walking toward us.

He was holding something in his hand. I noticed it but it didn't really register. I think Dustin understood before I did, because I could feel him tense next to me. Troy pressed it and it snicked open. He had a switchblade.

"Toothless," he greeted Dustin.

"Shit. Run, Mike!"

Dustin screamed the words, dumping his bike and grabbing my hand. I gaped at him. My brain felt like it wasn't working properly. I felt like there was something I should be doing, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

"What?"

"Run! Come on!"

He yanked on my arm to get me moving and I finally let go of my bike.

We ran. I couldn't hear them, because we were making too much noise, but I knew they were chasing us. What else would they be doing? They'd made it their lifetime goal to chase us. And we'd been too busy to think that we should have been on our guard. We had humiliated Troy in front of half the school. He actually had a reason to want to beat the shit out of us this time. Or worse. I'd never seen him with a knife before, even when we'd ran into him outside of school. The knife was new. As if to echo my thoughts, I heard him scream behind me.

"You're dead, Wheeler!"

His voice was too close. Closer than I'd expected.

I kept my eyes fixed on Dustin's back and tried to run faster.

"Move, Mike!" Dustin shrieked without turning around to see how close or far away I was. I think he was trying to spur himself on by yelling encouragement at me. "Mike, come on, run!"

We ran for about half a mile. Dustin had slowed and I passed him.

Now I was the one yelling encouragement. I glanced back every few seconds to make sure he was still there. They'd chased us nearly to the quarry before he stopped completely.

"Ah, cramp!"

I threw a look back at me. He was clutching his stomach.

"Just keep going!"

The words were idiotic but I didn't know what else to say. We had to keep going; therefore he had to keep running. I looked back again and he was still just standing there. And only Troy was still chasing us. James must have had a cramp of his own.

"Keep going!"

Dustin finally broke into a shuffling run, holding his side. We were at the cliff when James came around the bend in front of us. Shit. They'd split up to flank us. We both turned around without even thinking about it, wanting to run. We couldn't. Troy was there. The only other way out was the cliff. The cliff they'd thought "Will" had fallen off of before hitting the water.

We were trapped.

"Shit!" Dustin cried.

I scrambled in the dirt for a rock, for anything that could be a makeshift weapon. Dustin grabbed a stick and brandished it like a sword.

"Stay back! Don't come any closer!"

They both laughed at my threat. To be honest, I didn't blame them. They had us beat and we all knew it. I did the only thing I could, I threw the rock at James. I missed him by several feet. Maybe even more. I watched the rock's progress through the air in disbelief. Shit.

"Nice throw, numbnuts."

With a war cry, Dustin lunged at Troy. He swung the stick at his face

with all of the force he could muster, but Troy stepped back easily. Dustin was off-balance, and Troy grabbed him immediately and spun him around. He gripped him tightly. He held the knife to my friend's throat.

"Get off! Get off me!" Dustin didn't seem to be aware of the knife, he was struggling to break free.

"Let him go! Let him go!"

I ran forward a couple of steps until his voice stopped me.

"Stay back, or I cut him!" And he meant it. I could tell. Dustin could, too, because he stopped struggling and stayed as still as possible.

I stopped immediately. James could have grabbed me at any time, but he didn't. He was a few feet behind me, just watching us.

"What do you want?"

As if I didn't already know.

"I want to know how you did it," Troy snapped. His face twisted in anger.

"How I did what?"

I knew exactly what he meant, and Troy knew it. He pressed the knife in a little as a warning. Dustin whimpered.

"I know you did something to me. Some nerdy science shit to make me do that."

Nerdy science shit. Seriously. That's what he said. I couldn't resist scoffing at him then. He was just such an idiot.

"You mean piss your pants?"

Dustin, amazingly, was trying not to giggle.

"Our friend has superpowers, and she squeezed your tiny bladder with her mind!"

Troy jerked Dustin's head back when couldn't stop giggling and Dustin groaned.

"Shut up! I think I should save Toothless here a trip to the dentist. Help him lose the rest of his baby teeth."

James laughed from behind me.

"Let him go. Let him go!"

"I'll let him go, sure. But first...it's your turn."

"My turn for what?"

"Wet yourself."

I just stared at him. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"What?"

"Jump...or Toothless here gets an early trip to the dentist."

I looked over at the edge of the cliff immediately. I knew what he meant. But he couldn't be serious. People had died from falling or jumping off it before. I looked back at him and his face was serious. He meant it. And I should have known, because he had a knife. And like I said, the knife was new.

I looked at Dustin. Then I looked back at the edge. And I think Dustin knew then that I would do it, because he started struggling and screaming again.

"Stop! No!"

Troy held him steady and angled the knife at his mouth while I watched in horror.

"I'll cut him right now!"

And I knew he would. I knew it. I walked slowly toward the edge.

"All right. Just hold on! Hold on!"

I kept walking, even when Dustin tried to stop me.

“Mike, don’t do it. I don’t need my baby teeth, Mike!”

I ignored him. I had to. He was my best friend. One of my best friends. And I’d do anything for him.

“Mike, seriously, don’t!”

His voice was high and wavering with panic and I tried to tune it out. I stood on the edge. The toes of my shoes were hanging over. My feet knocked a couple of pebbles over and I watched them fall. I looked down at the water below me. It wasn’t directly below me, not from here. I wouldn’t hit the water. The rocks were underneath me. I knew I’d hit them instead.

I turned around to look at Dustin and he shook his head frantically at me.

“Mike, don’t do it! Seriously, don’t do it, man! Seriously, don’t!”

James finally came closer. He looked panicked, almost as panicked as Dustin. He’d finally realized that this wasn’t a joke. That it wouldn’t end with us getting beaten up. It would end with one of us dead, and he didn’t want any part of that. I knew that, but I also knew that he wouldn’t do anything to stop it from happening.

“Troy, I don’t think this is a good idea, man.”

Troy ignored him and James fell silent. He backed away a couple of feet, like that erased any culpability on his part.

“Mike, don’t!”

Troy was tired of me hesitating. He held the knife closer to Dustin and looked at me, waiting.

“Dentist’s office opens in five...four!...three!”

I turned around again. I took a couple of deep breaths and leaned slightly forward, looking at the drop before me.

“Two!”

“MIKE!”

“One!”

I didn't jump. That required too much thinking about it, too much willingness. I just closed my eyes and walked forward, like there wasn't a suicidal drop in front of me. I just stepped off. Right foot first.

And then I dropped, screaming.

My scream cut off abruptly because I'd stopped. I couldn't feel the air breaking in front of my face anymore. I was motionless. I stopped screaming abruptly, because I thought I'd hit the ground. I really did. I thought I was dead. I had to be dead, because I'd stopped falling. I gradually became aware that if I was considering any of that, I was still thinking. And if I was still thinking, I was still alive. I was gasping, which meant I was still breathing. And if I was breathing, I was definitely alive. I thought I'd fallen lucky. That I had landed but hadn't been killed. It was a stupid thought but it was all I could think of. I didn't feel anything. There wasn't any pain.

I finally opened my eyes.

I was frozen in mid-air, facing the rocks below me. That was somehow more terrifying than just falling, because I was stuck just staring at the ground and waiting to fall. I can't even describe how that felt. I sometimes still have dreams about it.

I waved my arms uselessly like I could push myself away from the rocks below me somehow. They were still so far away. And they looked hard. I knew I wouldn't fall lucky if I fell. I'd be killed.

I hung there in the air for several endless seconds. I had no idea what had happened even though it should have been obvious. I was too terrified to be able to think about it rationally. It's kind of a blur now but I think I remembered wondering if my backpack had caught on a rock when I'd stepped off, which didn't make any sense because there hadn't been any protruding rocks at the top.

And then I couldn't think anymore, because it was over. It felt like something grabbed me by the back and was pulling me. Pulling me hard. Abruptly, I was flying backward the way I'd came.

"Whoa! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," I whimpered, watching the ground recede. It seemed to take minutes to get back up. I'd fallen further than I'd thought. I couldn't look away from the rocks, from how close to death I had been.

And then I was back up. I flew backwards over Dustin, over Troy and James. They were all standing at the edge, staring at me in shock. They craned their heads to watch me pass over them.

And then it was over.

The force that had held me let go and I should have landed hard on my feet, but my legs were still shaking and I couldn't stand up. I keeled backward and landed hard. And now I felt something. My ankle hurt. That was it. I'd stepped off a cliff and had ended up with a sore ankle. I didn't even care. I was glad for it, glad for the slight pain. It could have been so much worse.

I glanced up at the guys, still staring at me near the edge. I ran my hand over the rocky dirt to reassure myself that I was alive, still on solid ground. My heart rate was slowing and then I knew. I knew what had happened. Who had saved me. I turned my head.

She was there. Right there in front of me.

She was walking toward us. She didn't look distant or vague at all, like she sometimes did. She was completely there, completely present. Focused. She was walking purposefully toward us, chin angled toward her chest. She'd lost her wig somewhere and her face was dirty from sleeping wherever she'd slept the night before. She was there, and she looked furious. Deadly.

I'd never been so happy to see someone in my entire life.

Eleven usually gave me that feeling.

The guys followed my gaze and saw her, too. I didn't take my eyes off of her, but I could see movement out of the corner of my eye. Troy



got in front of Dustin, still holding his knife out toward Eleven. James stepped up next to him.

Everything happened very quickly after that.

James flew backward and landed hard in the dirt. Troy stopped, staring at his friend in shock, even though he'd seen what had just happened to me. He couldn't process it. I glanced over briefly when James was thrown, and then looked back at Eleven.

She was glaring at Troy. And she looked murderous. She jerked her chin hard, to the left, never taking her eyes off Troy. I heard a horrible crack and Troy shrieked in pain. The knife dropped out of his hand.

"She broke my arm! She broke my arm!"

He cradled his arm, staring at her in fear. James shoved himself backward, away from her, in case he was next. But I knew she wouldn't hurt him. I knew why she'd hurt Troy and had just shoved James. Troy was the one that made me jump. Troy was the one that would have killed me.

Eleven never even blinked. And she never took her eyes off of them, never stopped glaring at them. Her nose was bleeding again.

"Go."

She bit the word off angrily, and I knew she was warning them. If they stayed any longer, she might actually kill them. Maybe she wouldn't even mean to. Maybe she wouldn't be able to stop herself. She stood with her legs spread and her face down, scowling. As Dustin said later, she looked like a gunslinger cleaning up Dodge. She looked like a hero.

James heaved himself up and ran without hesitation. He didn't even look around to see if Troy was behind him. He just went. Troy followed, still holding his arm.

"Let's get out of here!" Troy screamed.

He didn't seem to realize that James was actually in front of him, and

was already leaving him behind. "Let's go!"

"Go!" James screamed back at him.

And they did. They ran. James stumbled once and went down. Troy breezed past him without a second look. James pulled himself up and followed.

Dustin turned around to watch them flee, grinning.

"Yeah, that's right! You better run!" Dustin screamed, delirious with happiness. He pointed behind him, at El. "She's our friend, and she's crazy! You come back here and she'll kill you! You hear me? She'll kill you, you sons of bitches! She'll kill you, you hear me?"

I heard Eleven gasp and looked away from Troy and James immediately. Her nose was gushing and her eyes were starting to close. Before I could even stand up, her body went limp and she fell sideways to the ground.

I crawled a few feet before I could stand up and run to her. Dustin was right behind me.

"El!"

"Eleven! Are you okay?"

I rolled her over onto her back. She didn't move. She was unconscious. I leaned over her. Dustin hovered behind me, panicking.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god--"

"Dustin, shut up! El! Can you hear me?"

She didn't move. I checked her pulse. She was breathing. She was just drained. Even though it had happened before, it didn't make it any easier to see. It didn't make me any less worried about her.

"El, are you okay? El?"

Her eyes finally opened and found me. She started to cry when I smiled at her.

“Mike...I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed a little. What did she have to be sorry about? I was the one that needed to apologize. I shook my head.

“Sorry? What are you sorry for?”

“The gate...” There was a long pause.

“...I opened it. I’m the monster.”

I’d kind of figured that. The gate part, not the part about her being a monster. It was the only thing that made sense. What else could create that amount of energy?

I smiled at her again.

“No. No, El. You’re not the monster,” I told her emphatically. “You saved me. Do you understand?”

She was still crying.

“You saved me.”

I pulled her gently into a sitting position and hugged her, rubbing her shoulder until she stopped crying. Dustin hesitated, then knelt down and hugged us both.

We stayed like that for a long time.

Dustin let go first.

“Hey, El.”

She turned her face toward him.

“You have any Eggos left?”

She pulled away from me so she could shake her head. I let her go and sat back.

“Shit. I’m starving.”

She gave a tiny laugh and Dustin grinned. He gave me a thumbs-up.

"I'm gonna go get the bikes," he told us. He was already walking away.

"Wait! What happened to not splitting the party?"

"What, like they're gonna come back? Seriously. I'm telling you, they're still running. They're gonna run right out of town. Maybe even out of state."

That was actually a possibility. But I still didn't like the idea of him leaving alone. Will had been taken when he was alone.

Dustin saw the thought in my face.

"I know. But El needs to rest. And you've got your super-comm, we can stay in contact the whole time."

I sighed. I knew he was right. And I wasn't going to leave her alone, either.

"Okay. Channel 10." I took my backpack off and opened it, grabbing for my super-comm.

"I know. I'll be back soon."

"Be careful!"

"Copy that," he said, already walking away.

He hadn't even made a couple of feet before he spoke into his super-comm.

"Mike. I'm still alive. Over."

"Yeah, Dustin. I can see that. You're like five feet away. Over."

Dustin turned around to grin at us before leaving.

I sat my backpack on the ground.

"You want to rest? You can use it as a pillow."

El didn't answer, she just leaned her head against my shoulder instead. I laughed.

"Okay. That works, too. Oh, hey!" I was rummaging in my backpack. I still had my share of Dustin's supplies from our last mission. The chips were a loss, they'd been crushed completely at some point. I tossed them aside. I found a slightly squished candy bar and a bruised apple.

El raised her head when I offered them to her. She looked at me but I shook my head.

"Nah. I'm good."

She turned her head to look in the direction Dustin had gone. She looked back at me and gave me a questioning glance.

"Nah. He'll be fine."

Eleven devoured the food as quickly as possible. At least she'd had some fruit. That had to be better than anything else she'd eaten this week. She seemed a little stronger when she was finished. She handed me the remains and I tucked the wrapper and core into my backpack.

"I'm really sorry. Again. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

She looked away.

"I hurt him."

"He's okay. You didn't mean to. It's okay."

She still wasn't looking at me, so I touched her on the shoulder.

"Hey. It's okay. Really. I promise. And friends don't lie, remember?"

She gave me a tiny smile and nodded.

"Okay. Good."

She rested her head on my shoulder again and we waited in silence

for Dustin. It took him longer than I'd expected. I'd forgotten he'd be pushing two bikes instead of one.

He kept up a steady stream of chatting for our entertainment on his way back. I wasn't sure how he'd managed it until without a free hand. When he finally came in sight, I saw he'd strapped his super-comm to his bike. He was wearing his headset.

"Good thinking," I told him as he dropped my bike in front of us.

"Yep. I'm awesome."

"You ready?"

El nodded.

"Okay. Let's go home."

I washed her face in the bathroom, trying to be gentle. I was alarmed to see that her ears had bled, too. That hadn't happened last time. Was that normal? As normal as any of this could be?

When her face was clean of blood and dirt, I stepped back.

"That's better."

She looked at me sadly for few seconds, and then turned her face to her reflection in the mirror. She patted her short hair forlornly and I sighed.

"You don't need it."

"Still pretty?"

She asked the question without looking away from her reflection. I don't think she saw the same person I did.

She finally looked at me when I didn't respond right away.

"Yeah!" I said, too emphatically. "Pretty. Really pretty."

She looked back at her reflection and smiled, the trademark tiny Eleven smile.

“El?”

She turned to me and her gaze was intense.

“Yes?”

And suddenly the moment was awkward. I felt nervous and I didn't really know why.

“Um. I'm happy you're home.”

She nodded and smiled again.

“Me too.”

I paused for a second, then leaned forward. I didn't really know what I was doing, what I was planning to do. Except that I did, somehow. She leaned toward me, too. We were still several inches away from each other when the door was thrown open and we both sprang apart.

“Guys!”

Dustin was obviously panicked. He was breathing hard, as if he'd run a race instead of a couple of feet from the couch to the bathroom door.

“It's Lucas. I think he's in trouble.”

## 9. Chapter 9

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

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We all ran to the super-comm, Dustin still talking.

"You remember how he said he was looking for the gate?"

"Yeah?"

"What if he found it?"

Whatever he'd found, it couldn't be good. We heard Lucas shouting over the radio, but he was too far out of range. I grabbed the super-comm from Dustin and held it up to my ear. I couldn't make out the words, just the tone. He sounded frantic.

"What's he saying?"

"I don't know, he's way out of range."

I thought about asking El to boost the signal. I knew she could do it. But I also knew she shouldn't. She'd already used too much of her power lately without getting to rest or eat much. I couldn't forget the blood coming out of her ears. It could be dangerous for her to do anything else.

"...son of a bitch!"

That came through loud and clear. Dustin and I exchanged startled looks.



“Lucas, if you can hear us. Slow down. We can’t understand you.”

There was some more gibberish through the static. I thought he was on the move, riding his bike while he tried to talk. And then I caught what sounded like an actual word. I looked at Dustin.

“Mad hen,” Dustin proposed. “Does that mean anything to you? Like a code name or something?”

I shook my head, not in negation, but to ask him to be quiet.

The next words were crystal clear. He’d gotten close enough to be in range.

“The Bad Men are coming!”

“Bad Men,” I repeated dully. I turned to Dustin in a panic. “Bad men!”

I didn’t bother to reply to Lucas. I dropped the super-comm.

“Stay here,” I told El.

I pounded up the steps, Dustin at my heels. We ran to the window. I didn’t see anything, except a Hawkins Power and Light van. Then I noticed the way it was parked. It was directly facing my house, and someone was sitting in it. The van wasn’t running.

“What’s that guy doing?”

“You don’t think...” Dustin said, looking at me.

I didn’t answer. I just ran into the kitchen. My mom was on the phone with Steve’s mom. She was looking for Nancy. Nancy had been acting weird since Barb left town. She’d even snuck out before breakfast and she hadn’t been back since.

“Mom!”

She held up a hand without looking at me.

“Mom!”

“Michael, I’m on the phone...” and blah, blah, blah. I wasn’t listening. I didn’t have time to listen.

“Did you schedule any repairs?” I interrupted.

“What?”

“Is there anyone supposed to come do repairs on the house?”

Mom gave me the patented mom look. The look that asked what I’d just broken.

“I don’t understand, is there something wrong?”

I was practically stamping my feet in frustration.

“No! Mom, nothing is wrong with the house.”

My mom was still watching me suspiciously when Dustin ran in.

“Mike!”

I didn’t even look at him. I was waiting for my mom to answer the question.

“One second!”

“Mike!” He screamed it, in his loudest voice. I suddenly remembered that he’d been at the window and nearly slapped my forehead. Idiot. I turned to him wordlessly.

Dustin tried to be calm, since we weren’t alone. “We need to leave... right...now.”

He said the words as evenly as possible but his eyes were wide with fear. Fuck. And without another word, he ran from the room. I darted after him, ignoring my mom. Before I left, I skidded to a halt and looked back at her. She looked bewildered. If I’d had the time, I would have felt sorry for her. Her oldest kids were both acting freaking nuts.

“If anyone asks where I am, tell them I’ve left the country!”

Dustin and I bolted down the stairs. Eleven was waiting at the foot of the stairs, eyes terrified. Dustin seized our backpacks off the couch while I grabbed Eleven's hand. And then we ran for it. Thank God for the basement door. Maybe they weren't watching the back of the house.

Dustin pulled on his headset as he ran to his bike, so he could try to talk to Lucas again. I was glad he'd attached the super-comm to his bike earlier. We grabbed our bikes and ran with them to the street. I stopped running so El could get on; at the exact same moment she stopped running and climbed on without even checking to see if the bike was there. We were in sync again, like she'd read my mind. I noticed it even if I didn't have the chance to really think about it.

We paused, looking over our shoulders before leaving. They'd been watching the back of my house after all. They were coming for us. The Bad Men.

I had to wonder how far they'd go, how desperate they were, to approach us in broad daylight. There were more vans than I could count behind us, and 7 or 8 people walking toward us. Most of them were wearing Hawkins Power and Light uniforms, except I was pretty sure they didn't require their employees to wear guns on their belts when they were out on service calls.

The only one that was dressed differently was an older man with white hair. He was wearing a suit and tie. He was in the lead. He was in charge. I felt El stiffen behind me and I knew. She knew that man. He was staring fixedly at her, an odd smile on his face. He looked almost happy to see her.

"Go, go, go go go!" Dustin prompted, and we went. I heard engines behind us before we'd even made it halfway down the street. We were being chased by vans full of people who wouldn't mind killing us, on the street I've lived on my whole life.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god," Dustin babbled. He probably would have kept going, except Lucas's voice interrupted from the radio strapped to his bike.

"Dustin! Dustin, do you copy?"

“Yeah, Lucas, they’re on us!”

“Where are you?”

I craned back to look at the radio as if I’d be able to see Lucas.

“Cornwallis.”

“Meet me at Elm and Cherry!”

“Copy that, Elm and Cherry.”

Dustin looked at me to see if I copied, too. I did.

“Okay!”

We cut through someone’s yard and onto another street. More vans were turning toward us at the stop sign, at least three of them. How many fucking vans did they have?

“Shit!” Dustin yelled when he saw them.

“This way, come on!” I called, cutting through the grass of someone else’s front yard and to a shortcut at the back of their house. The vans wouldn’t be able to follow us this way. I didn’t have hopes that we’d lose them, though. But I didn’t know what else we could do.

Two girls were playing a game and were in immediate danger of being flattened by all of us. Dustin cut in front of me, ringing the bell on his bike to herald our approach.

“Out of the way, out of the way!” He kept yelling it and ringing his bell, making no attempt whatsoever to veer around them. They’d have to move, and they did. We rode in between them.

We came out right in front of Lucas on Elm and Cherry. Good timing. And best of all, no vans. I braked and waited for Lucas to catch up. Dustin stopped, too.

“Lucas!” I yelled happily when he pulled up beside me.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I think we lost them,” Dustin panted. Immediately, as if the words were a jinx, the vans were in sight again.

“Go go go go!”

Dustin screamed wordlessly as we peeled out. How the hell could they do this, I kept asking myself. How the hell could they be so willing to kill kids?

“Go go go go go! Faster!”

Dustin tried to pick up the pace but we all knew we weren’t going to be able to outrun them. We’d have to think of something else. And fast.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

A van pulled out in front of us.

Dustin’s “shits” turned into an inarticulate scream. There was nowhere to go. The van was heading right for us. It was going to hit us. I felt El’s hands momentarily tighten around my waist.

It was only a few feet away from us. I tensed, like that was going to keep it from killing us all. And then it was airborne. My mouth dropped open as it glided silently over us, turning slowly in midair. We all leaned back to watch its passage. Luckily none of us fell off our bikes, because we sure as hell weren’t paying attention.

The van crashed behind us, upside down, blocking the street. The other vans slammed on their brakes. We all gaped at each other but we didn’t slow down. We had to keep going. Without speaking, we headed toward the junk yard again. We didn’t know where else we could go without them following.

I got off the bike first. I held it steady and helped El climb down. She was panting and her nose was bleeding again. I checked her over quickly but her ears weren’t bleeding this time. I took that as a good sign.

“Holy...holy shit!” Dustin panted behind us.

I eased El into a sitting position because I could tell she couldn’t stand up anymore.

“Did...did you see what she did to that van?” Dustin asked.

“No, Dustin. We missed it,” I said sarcastically.

“I mean, that was...”Dustin stammered and didn’t continue.

“Awesome,” Lucas finished for him. He sounded emphatic.

We all turned to gawk at him, including Eleven. He sounded completely different from the Lucas we’d been spending time with over the past week.

“It was awesome,” Lucas repeated, and the words sounded like an apology. It had finally sunk in, the kind of danger she was in. She was our age, and grown adults wanted to murder her, just because she had something they didn’t. Something they wanted. Without another word, he made his way toward El. He knelt down in front of her.

“Everything I said...about you being a traitor and stuff...I was wrong. I’m sorry.” He touched her back lightly as he spoke.

“Friends...friends don’t lie,” El told him quietly. “I’m sorry, too.”

They smiled at each other.

“Me too,” I said. I held out my hand again. This time, he shook it.

“I don’t really have anything to be sorry about, but I guess I’m sorry, too,” Dustin told us.

We laughed.

We spent the next few minutes just trying to get our breath and think of a plan. Any plan. We had to think of something quickly because none of us were safe now.

“Did you find it? The gate?”

I didn't expect him to answer in the affirmative, but I also wasn't sure if it mattered. If El had opened it, she probably knew where it was. And if not, she wouldn't be messing with our compasses this time.

“Yeah. I think I did, actually.”

“Where is it?” Dustin was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Lucas grabbed a stick and sat down, gesturing us to join him. We sat in a circle while he drew a map in the dirt.

“This...is Randolph road, right here.”

He marked a spot.

“The fence starts here, and goes all the way around.”

Lucas sat a dented soda can down.

“And this is the lab, right here. The gate's gotta be in there somewhere. It's gotta be.”

“Well, who owns Hawkins lab?” Dustin asked him.

“The sign says Department of Energy.”

“Department of Energy? What do you think that means?”

“It means government. Military,” I told them.

“Then why does it say energy?”

“Just trust me. All right? It's military. My dad's told me before.”

“Mike's right, there's soldiers out front.”

“Do they make, like, lightbulbs and stuff?”

Lucas rolled his eyes, for about the millionth time this week. I couldn't blame him, I was rolling my own.

“No! Weapons. To fight the Russians and commies and stuff.”

“Weapons,” Lucas breathed, staring at Eleven. We all did. I thought I understood now. What her name meant. She wasn’t a person to them, she was a project. A weapon. The lab was probably the only place she’d ever lived, until a few days ago.

“Oh Jesus, this is bad,” Dustin exclaimed.

“Really bad. The place is like a fortress,” Lucas said.

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But we can’t go home. We’re fugitives now.”

I half-expected Lucas to scoff at the dramatic word, but he didn’t. He knew it was true. And if he didn’t, he would have been convinced of it a second later, because that’s when we heard the helicopter.

“Guys? Do you hear that?”

We waited a few seconds, until it became clear it was heading toward us. We scrambled up and stowed the bikes under an abandoned bus, where they wouldn’t be seen. From the air at least. Lucas and I stashed ours, but Dustin was having trouble.

“Go go go go!”

“Come on, come on!” Dustin yelled, shoving at his bike. It didn’t budge. “It’s stuck!”

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!”

“I’m trying!”

Lucas ran around Dustin and they both heaved. The bike finally went under the bus, scraping the back wheel. We ran for it, ducking down onto the floor of the bus.

“Mental,” Dustin exclaimed, listening to the helicopter recede. And he was right, it was mental. A helicopter being sent out after four kids. Even if one of them did have superpowers.



After a few minutes of silence, we started to relax. We decided to stay in the bus, just in case it came back.

“What the hell are we going to do?”

“I have no idea.”

“How are we going to get to the gate? They’ve got military posted everywhere.”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you think they know about the monster?”

“I have no idea.”

“How long do you think they’re going to look for us?”

I opened my mouth but Dustin spoke for me.

“Let me take a wild guess and answer that question for you, Lucas. He has no fucking idea. Shut up with the questions.”

“You shut up,” Lucas snapped

“Both of you, shut up.”

“Everyone, shut up,” a new voice added, and we all gaped at El for a minute before breaking into a fit of laughter.

When Dustin sobered, he leaned his head back against the dusty seat.

“Jesus, this is mental. I don’t know how much more weirdness I can take.”

“Good job. You probably just jinxed the shit out of us,” Lucas told him, laughing.

“I did not. Shut up.”

“Mike? Mike, are you there? Mike?”

We all jumped. I looked at El automatically, because it was a girl’s

voice, even though I knew it wasn't her voice. She looked back at me blankly. It sounded like Nancy's voice, but tinny and faint. We all looked around stupidly, as if expecting her to appear in front of us.

"You guys hear that?"

"Mike, it's me, Nancy."

The voice was coming from my backpack. I dug out the super-comm and held it out so we could all hear her.

"Mike, answer. Mike, we need you to answer."

"Is that your sister?" Lucas asked.

Dustin shushed him.

"This is an emergency, Mike."

"Okay, this is really weird," Dustin said.

Lucas grabbed for the radio but I snatched it back.

"Don't answer!" I told him.

"She said it was an emergency!"

"What if it was a trick?"

"It's your sister!"

I had to voice my worst thought. They'd been at the house. What if she'd come home while they were there?

"What if the bad people kidnapped her? What if they're forcing her to say this?"

"I need you to answer," Nancy pleaded.

"It's like Lando Calrissian," Dustin intoned dramatically from behind me. "Don't answer."

"We need to know that you're there, Mike."

She sounded panicked. Was that because she was worried about me, or because they had her?

And then a different voice spoke up.

“Listen, kid, this is the Chief. If you’re there, pick up. We know you’re in trouble and we know about the girl.”

We looked at each other in shock.

“Why is she with the Chief?”

“And how the hell does he know about...” Dustin glanced meaningfully at El.

“We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there? Do you copy? Over.” His voice was impatient, like he could see us listening to him and ignoring him.

I tried to think it over. He knew about Eleven. I didn’t know how he’d learned about her. And I had no idea why Nancy was with him, where she came into this. I didn’t want to but I thought we’d have to answer. We didn’t really have any other option, besides staying in the bus until we all starved to death.

I sighed.

“Yeah. I copy. It’s Mike. I’m here. We’re here.”

There was an audible sigh of relief.

“About damned time. Where are you? Over.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows at me in warning. I nodded to show I understood. It might not be safe to give our location, even over the radio. They might be listening. The problem was that I didn’t know what else I could say. I couldn’t exactly offer to meet him, even if one of us could sneak away, because we’d still have to set up a location. They’d still be able to track us. I hesitated for a long time, until the Chief’s strained, irritated voice spoke again.

“Kid. You there? Answer. Over.”

I jumped when Dustin practically ripped the super-comm out of my hands.

“Dustin!”

I lunged for it but he pushed me back.

“I’ve got this. Chill out.”

He pressed the button.

“Chief. We’re still here. Remember Bobby White’s party? Over.”

Lucas clapped Dustin on the back and I gave him a thumbs-up. He grinned at us and mouthed the word “awesome.” Lucas laughed, because it was pretty awesome thinking. Pretty quick thinking. Bobby White was in Nancy’s class. A couple of years ago he’d gone to the junkyard with his asshole friends to set off fireworks and get drunk. Predictably, it hadn’t ended well. He’d managed to set fire to half of the junkyard and part of the field. Rumor had it that Bobby had been so drunk; he hadn’t even realized when the police had shown up. Supposedly, he’d tried to drag Hopper over to the keg and Hopper had cheerfully slapped handcuffs on him after Bobby had poured him a beer.

We were all anxiously watching the radio, but we didn’t need to worry. There was hardly a pause at all before he responded.

“Stay put. Over and out.”

Dustin and Lucas high-fived. Eleven watched them curiously. Lucas saw her expression and laughed.

“It’s what you do when you want to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?”

“Yeah, like, when something good happens. Then you high-five. Like this,” Dustin added, holding up his palm. Eleven just stared at it. “No, you’ve got to hold your hand up, too.”

She raised her palm and he lightly slapped it with his.

“See? That was a high-five. Because we’re awesome.”

“Awesome,” she repeated, smiling a little.

“Yep. Totally.”

She still had her hand raised. She turned her palm toward Lucas and he slapped it, too. She looked so pleased with herself that we laughed.

A few minutes later, we were sitting in the dusty, slightly ancient seats and staring out the windows. We knew it hadn’t been long enough yet, but it seemed like it had been hours since we’d passed on our location. Dustin kept checking his watch and shaking it irritably when he saw it had only been a minute since the last time he’d checked.

“I hope they don’t know what we meant,” Lucas said. He didn’t have to specify who he meant by they.

“How could they? Even if they were listening?”

“It wasn’t like, an uncrackable code or anything. Not that it wasn’t awesome,” he added, because Dustin looked offended. “Just that everyone in town knows about Bobby White. Including the deputies.”

“That’s true,” Dustin said morosely.

“Even if they can find out, it would take time. Hopper would get here first. We’d have time to get away,” I told them, because they all wore similar expressions of worry. One of us had to stay optimistic.

As the minutes passed, it was harder for any of us to stay calm. Or to keep from squabbling. Dustin started pacing and it was driving me crazy.;

“Will you stop pacing?” I asked when I couldn’t take it anymore.

“It’s been way too long. Do you know what? Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is a trap and the Bad Men are coming for us right now.” His voice was getting louder and higher with each word.

"It's not a trap," Lucas argued. "Why would the Chief set us up? Nancy, maybe. But the Chief?"

I raised my hands in exasperation and glared at him. He shrugged. Nancy wouldn't betray us, not on purpose. We haven't really gotten along in awhile but we don't hate each other, either.

"Lando Calrissian," is all Dustin said.

"Would you shut up about Lando?"

"I don't feel good about this," Dustin said in a normal tone of voice, and then, in case we didn't get the point, he screamed it. "I don't feel good about this!"

"When do you feel good about anything?" Lucas shouted back.

Dustin didn't snap at him. He stopped pacing and looked toward the front of the bus. We scrambled up out of our seats. We could hear cars approaching. It sounded like more than one car. We ran to the front of the bus to get a look. A couple of cars were parking in the junkyard. And it wasn't Hopper. It wasn't even Nancy.

"Shit!" Dustin swore, ducking down and out of sight.

"Go go go go!" I told them, as quietly as possible. Not that there was really anywhere to actually go, except the back of the bus. We ran, crouched, to the end of the bus and threw ourselves down. I crouched in front of Eleven, because I wanted to protect her if I could. Which was a pretty lame instinct, considering she'd been the one protecting us for the past week.

"Lando."

"You think they saw us?"

"Both of you, shut up," I hissed.

We waited for what seemed like hours. I kept fighting the idiotic impulse to get up and peek out the windows to see what was happening. Dustin kept tapping his fingers on the back of the seat and I knew he was feeling the same urge.

The bus door slid open and we all tensed.

Then there was a groan and a thud. A large thud, like a body hitting the grass. We gave each other panicked looks but didn't move, because we could hear the sounds of more scuffling.

The door slid open again and someone stepped in. It was Hopper. We all stood up and stared at him. He's somehow taken them all out, in seconds. That was pretty good for a guy who usually hit the bar on his lunchbreak. He watched us impatiently.

"All right, let's go."

We didn't move.

"LET's GO!"

We scrambled for the door and down the steps. The thud had been a body; we could see that immediately, because he was still there, unconscious. I jumped over him but Dustin and Lucas didn't bother, they just ran right down his back and into the grass. He groaned weakly.

"Serves him right. Asshole," Lucas said, shrugging. We laughed until Hopper jabbed his finger alarmingly at his car and scowled at us. We stopped laughing and ran for it.

We headed to Will's house. Hopper didn't say much on the ride over, just enough to make us realize that we only knew part of the story. The biggest part, maybe, but still only part of it. We weren't alone. We weren't the only ones that knew about the Demogorgon, about Will being alive. It was time to combine our parties, time to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

When we pulled in the driveway, Mrs. Byers, Jonathan, and Nancy spilled out of the door like they'd been waiting for us. Probably because they had been.

Nancy surprised me by staring at me like she'd never seen me before.

"Mike! Oh my god, Mike!"

And she ran to hug me. I hugged her back in surprise. She'd been hanging out with Jonathan. Maybe he'd rubbed off on her somehow, and she'd learned how to be a good sister again.

She held me tightly.

"I was so worried about you!"

That was news to me. I could only gape at her.

"Yeah, uh...me too?"

Nancy finally let me go. She caught sight of El, wearing her old dress and watching us.

"Is that my dress?"

I rolled my eyes. Trust Nancy to immediately hone in on the fact that we'd been going through her stuff. She hadn't worn the dress in about six years, and I told her so.

I expected her to snap at me, but she just smiled and hugged me again. It was starting to really creep me out. I was realized when Hopper motioned us impatiently from the door.

We exchanged stories inside, as quickly as possible. We all knew we were running out of time. Mrs. Byers had known Will was alive since the day after he'd disappeared. That should have surprised us, but I remembered her at the funeral. She'd been distracted and worried, but not grief-stricken. Somehow, he'd been communicating through her Christmas lights. Dustin started to question her, looking excited, but Hopper silenced him with a look. We didn't have time for the full story, not yet.

We knew Mrs. Byers had heard the Demogorgon, because she'd told Will to hide. But we were shocked to find out she'd actually seen it, too. It had torn itself out of her wall, after Will told her to run. Dustin looked both impressed and horrified at the same time.

"Jesus. And you actually came back?"

Lucas hit him once, hard, and he shut up.



I wasn't surprised she'd come back. Will was her son, and he'd still been communicating from their house. She'd never leave it while he needed her.

I was surprised to learn that Jonathan and Nancy had actually gone looking for it. And they'd done more than that, they'd bought the supplies to try to trap it and kill it. I could understand Jonathan's motivation, he was Will's brother. Will was his best friend. But I couldn't imagine Nancy as a monster hunter. Not until she told us about Barb. Barb hadn't left town. She'd been taken, too. Just like Will.

Nancy explained that the Demogorgon was attracted to blood, like a shark. She said she'd figured it out when she'd seen it eating a deer.

"You saw it?" Dustin asked, goggling at her.

She shuddered.

"Yes. I saw it."

She and Jonathan shared a significant look.

"What?" I asked her.

"I...saw a tree. With a hole in it. It was glowing."

"Don't tell me you climbed in the hole," I said incredulously. "Even you wouldn't be that stupid."

The glare she gave me assured me that the old Nancy was still in there, somewhere.

"Sorry, I just meant, it was a really dangerous thing to do," I amended.

"I needed to find it. I needed to find Barb. Like you haven't done a ton of dangerous things this week for Will?"

She was right. I nodded and shut up so she could continue.

"Anyway...when I climbed out...I wasn't in the woods anymore.

Well, I was, but it was different. Everything looked the same, but different, too. It was darker, and colder.”

“Wait a second. The tree led you to the Upside Down?”

“The what?”

“Upside Down!”

“And I repeat, the what?”

Lucas didn’t bother replying; he turned to us instead.

“How is that possible? There are other ways for us to get in besides the gate?”

We shrugged.

“The what?” Nancy repeated.

We all sighed and looked at each other.

“Got a pencil?” Dustin asked.

“And paper,” Lucas added.

We didn’t have to tell them about El, Hopper and Mrs. Byers already knew, and they’d filled in Nancy and Jonathan. So we just repeated what Mr. Clarke had told us about the flea and the acrobat. And we told them about the Upside Down, and the gate that we’d tracked to Hawkins lab.

“Is this gate underground?” Hopper asked. The guys and I shrugged. We didn’t know. We were surprised when Eleven looked at him solemnly. She spoke for the first time, in a quiet voice. Quieter than usual.

“Yes.”

“Near a large water tank?”

“Yes.” Another whisper.

“How...how do you know all that?” Dustin asked, looking at Hopper.

“He’s seen it,” I answered.

Joyce leaned in, fixing El with her gaze. Her eyes were bright with tears. “Is there any way you could reach Will? That you could talk to him, in the...”

“Upside Down.”

“Yes. That.”

Eleven nodded and Nancy leaned forward.

“And my friend Barbara? Can you find her, too?”

She hesitated, then nodded again.

We sat around the kitchen table, or at least, El and I did. The others stood and hovered around us. We had propped up the super-comm.

“Too bad we fried the Heathkit,” Lucas said pessimistically. I knew how he felt. El had only been able to find Will once with the super-comm. I wasn’t sure it was strong enough to find them both.

El closed her eyes and concentrated, finding nothing but static. The lights flickered, and I leaned forward in anticipation. But the lights steadier immediately and Eleven opened her eyes. She looked unhappy.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to Mrs. Byers.

“What? What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I can’t find them,” El said, her voice breaking with sorrow. I marveled again that anyone could think she was a monster. That she could think that about herself, when she was crying that she couldn’t help two people she’d never even met.

El kept her eyes on Mrs. Byers, looking at her pleadingly. Mrs. Byers understood immediately and gave her a hug.

“It’s okay, honey. It’s okay.”

A few minutes later, Eleven escaped to the bathroom to wash her face, and we rushed to explain while she was gone. We didn’t want to make her feel worse.

“Whenever she uses her powers, she gets weak.”

“The more energy she uses, the more tired she gets,” Dustin added.

“Like, she flipped the van earlier,” Lucas said.

“It was awesome,” Dustin told them reverently.

“But she’s drained,” I said.

“Like a bad battery,” Dustin finished.

Mrs. Byers looked hopeful again.

“Well...how do we make her better?”

“We don’t,” I said. “We just have to wait and try again.”

“Well, how long?” Nancy asked me.

“I don’t know.”

“The bath.”

The quiet voiced startled all of us. Eleven was standing in the doorway, looking resigned.

“What?” Mrs. Byers asked.

Eleven paused before answering.

“I can find them.”

Another pause.

“In the bath.”

Whatever it meant, she was afraid of it. I knew that from the day of

Will's funeral, when I told her she could take a bath if she wanted. And I could see it in her face. She didn't want to do it, but she was going to, anyway. She looked terrified and determined at the same time. She looked like a hero.

She didn't have the words to explain what she meant, but Hopper was able to translate. He'd seen the water tank in the lab and once he described it, we were able to piece it together. The guys and I were up to date on our science fiction. The only thing we didn't know was the most important thing. We didn't know how to build one. And we definitely didn't have time to research it.

We needed help.

When the phone rings, it startles him and he jumps, dropping the stapled pages. He sets them on the coffee table before getting up and reaching for the phone. It must be getting late, he thinks, checking his watch. It is late. Very late, considering it's a school night. No one has called him past nine pm in over a year. And he suddenly has an intuition that he knows exactly who's calling him. The intuition is completely irrational and illogical, especially considering the story, but it feels true, anyway.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mr. C!"

He was right. It surprises him into a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Dustin asks.

"Nothing. What can I do for you?"

There's a little pause.

"Oh. Um. Did you say to answer the questions over eleven or twelve?"

"Eleven."

“Right, right. Eleven.”

Dustin snickers and Scott smiles a little. He’s pretty sure that Dustin didn’t call him because of chapter eleven.

“It’s kind of late to be getting started on homework, don’t you think?”

“Oh. Um. Yeah. I had a really busy day. What are you still doing up, anyway?”

Any other student would consider it a rude question to ask their teacher, but Dustin isn’t just any student.

“I’m reading the story Mike wrote. Have you read it?”

Dustin giggles again.

“Yeah. Yeah, you could say that. Which part are you at?”

“I think I’m getting to the part where you called me.”

This time they both laugh.

“Good timing!” Dustin tells him happily. “Thanks again for that, it helped a lot. I guess I’ll let you get back to reading. Have a good one, Mr. C.”

“Yes,” Scott replies thoughtfully. “You, too.”

Scott lowers the phone slowly, considering it. Considering the way Dustin thanked him for helping them. He remembers Dustin’s last phone call perfectly well. It was unusual, and not just because it was late at night. Dustin was insistent on learning how to build a sensory deprivation tank. He’d acted like it was urgent information and Scott had been curious. He’d questioned him at school but Dustin evaded him, glancing carefully at Mike before changing the subject.

Scott checks his watch again and returns to his chair, picking up where he left off.

We needed help.

Hopper sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"I'm not sure how helpful that's going to be tonight. The library's closed."

"Can't you get her to open? You're the Chief," Mrs. Byers reminded him.

"She might be a little pissed at me."

Dustin snorted with laughter and quickly looked back at me when Hopper scowled at him. Lucas looked at me, too. I raised my eyebrows at them both and they nodded.

"Yeah, good idea, but I don't know his number," Lucas told me, as if I'd asked the question aloud.

"What?" Hopper asked us.

We ignored him.

"I do!" Dustin cried.

"You do?"

"Memorized it. I thought it might come in handy. I figured we'd need him again."

"Awesome," I said, beaming at him.

"I know. I really am."

Hopper banged his fist on the table, making us jump. We'd forgotten he was in the room.

"What the hell are you talking about? Whose number? You can't call anyone, it's too dangerous."

"Don't worry, he's cool," Dustin said reassuringly.

"Yeah, we can trust him," Lucas added.

“Who is he?”

“Mr. Clarke,” I sighed. Hopper opened his mouth to protest but I kept talking. “We need help fast, and he’s the only one that would know how to build one.”

“How do you know that?”

We exchanged a glance and laughed.

“I just do. He’ll know.”

We didn’t wait for his permission, Dustin grabbed the phone and started dialing.

“Mr. Clarke? It’s Dustin.”

We waited, anxiously listening in on his phone call. On his side of it, anyway. Dustin turned around because we were all staring at him.

“Yeah, yeah. I just, I...I have a science question.”

“Do you know anything about sensory deprivation tanks? Specifically how to build one?”

Dustin paused, twirling the phone cord around his finger.

“Fun?” He asked dubiously.

It was frustrating to only hear half of the conversation, especially when Dustin’s tone changed and he became almost belligerent.

“You always say we should never stop being curious. To always open any curiosity door we find. Why are you keeping this curiosity door locked?”

Dustin turned around and beamed, giving us a thumbs-up. He raised one hand and made a writing gesture in the air. Lucas ran for the pencil and some paper. Less than ten seconds later, Dustin was at the table, writing frantic notes.

“Uh-huh. How much? Uh-huh. Yep, all right. Yeah, we’ll be careful.



Definitely. All right, Mr. Clarke. Yeah, I'll see you on Monday. I'll see you on Monday, Mr. Clarke!"

Dustin was already moving the phone away from his ear in his haste to end the conversation.

"Bye!" he shouted, hanging up without waiting for a reply. He turned to Mrs. Byers immediately.

"Do you still have that kiddie pool we bobbed for apples in?"

Joyce shrugged.

"I think so, yeah."

She looked at Jonathan for confirmation and he nodded.

"Good. Then we just need salt. And lots of it."

"How much is lots?" Hopper asked him, looking impressed in spite of himself.

Dustin scanned his notes quickly.

"1500 pounds."

Shit. Where were we going to get that much salt?

"Well, where are we gonna get that much salt?" Nancy asked, before I could.

Hopper's brow furrowed, and then he smiled.

"Come on. Let's go."

He was already halfway toward the door. The rest of us hadn't moved.

"Where are we going?" Dustin called.

"LET'S GO!"

We sprinted for the door, and not just the kids. All of us.

We took two cars, because we obviously couldn't all fit into one. Mrs. Byers, Lucas, and Dustin rode with Hopper. El and I were with Jonathan and Nancy.

Once we were all settled, Hopper rolled his window down.

"Follow me to the school. Don't drive over the speed limit, and don't follow too close."

Jonathan nodded and waited for Hopper to back out of the driveway before starting the car. He and Nancy shared a look before pulling out. Nancy touched his arm reassuringly. It was weird, to think of them hanging out and bonding. I had a feeling Steve Harrington was about to be single again.

El was clasping her hands tightly in her lap. Even in the darkness, I could see her knuckles were white.

"Is it really bad? The bath?"

She turned her head toward me and nodded slowly.

"Bad. Scary."

I thought she was finished, but she said two more words.

"The gate."

"The gate? That's how you opened it?"

She nodded.

"I didn't...I didn't know."

My heart sank. No wonder she was afraid of the bath. The last time she'd used it, she'd accidentally opened a door into another dimension. And she looked more than afraid. She looked terrified. She was clenching her hands tightly together. I reached for her hand and touched it lightly, until she relaxed. I held her hand, looking at her.

"You don't have to do it. We can figure something else out."

She looked up at me in surprise.

“If you’re afraid, I mean. You don’t have to do it.”

Her frown smoothed into a tiny smile.

“I know,” she said. “But I will.”

And I knew she would. Because she was brave. She was the bravest person I’d ever met.

“Okay. But you won’t be alone. I’ll be right there with you, okay? I mean, we all will be.”

She smiled at me again and I smiled back, before realizing that Nancy had turned around at some point to stare at us. Her gaze moved down to our hands and I realized I was still holding hers. Nancy didn’t say a word, she just raised her eyebrows and faced the front again.

We split up when we reached the school. Jonathan and Hopper went to get the de-icing salt, and Dustin and Lucas headed to the gym to set up the pool. Mrs. Byers and El went to get ready for the makeshift deprivation tank. El needed something to block out her vision and they’d found a pair of swimming goggles.

Nancy and I went to the shed to get the hoses, but the door was locked. I threw myself at the door and predictably, nothing happened. I sighed and didn’t bother to try it again. It hadn’t budged at all. Maybe El could get it unlocked.

“Stand back.”

Nancy aimed a rock at the lock and brought it down hard, smashing it open. I gaped at her again. Who was this person and where was my sister?

We quickly grabbed the hoses and wheeled them back to the gym.

“What did she even eat?” Nancy asked.

“What?”

“Eleven.”

“Oh. Candy, leftovers, Eggos...she really like Eggos.”

Nancy sighed and glanced at me.

“I knew you were acting weird. I just...thought it was because of Will.”

I met her eyes and shrugged.

“I knew you were acting weird, too. I just thought it was because of Steve.”

Nancy stopped pushing the wheelbarrow. She set it down gently.

“Hey. No more secrets, okay? From now on we tell each other everything.”

I was beginning to suspect that Nancy had been replaced by a monster from the Upside Down. But one that was a lot nicer than my sister.

“Okay,” I said agreeably. “Do you like Jonathan now?”

I wasn’t actually trying to be an asshole, I was just curious. Jonathan was a hell of a lot nicer than Steve Harrington. And he didn’t have stupid hair, either.

“What? No!” She scoffed. “No, it’s not...it’s not like that.”

I nodded but kept my mouth shut. Yeah, right. The extra denials weren’t exactly working in her favor.

“Do you like Eleven?”

I gaped at her stupidly for a few seconds.

“What? No! Ew! Gross!”

I turned around lamely because I’d just done exactly what she had. I started walking back toward the gym and she followed me. We didn’t speak again. Apparently it was still good to keep some things a secret.

We set up the tank, carefully testing the temperature. It needed to be a hell of a lot colder than a real bath. We dumped a ton of salt into it. Dustin kept dropping in eggs, to see if they'd float. When they didn't, Hopper and Jonathan poured in more salt. After the fourth or fifth try, one of them finally floated and I set up the super-comm.

We were ready.

When Eleven came out, she walked straight to the pool. She gazed down at it, hesitating. Then she looked at each of us in turn. Not everyone in the room, just us. Just her friends.

"Good luck," Dustin told her. He started to give her a hug and ended up just patting her on the shoulder.

"Yeah. Good luck," Lucas repeated. "We'll celebrate with a high-five after, okay?"

She laughed a little and then turned to me.

She surprised me by hugging me tightly. I returned the hug, patting her back.

"It will be okay. We're gonna be right here."

She nodded and pulled away. She looked at the pool again, then stepped out of her shoes and socks. She undid my watch and held it out and I took it without speaking.

I'd told her it was going to be okay but I was worried. I knew how drained she was. She'd slept outside last night and she hadn't eaten anything more substantial than a waffle or a candy bar since the lasagna. I couldn't forget the way she'd looked that day in the AV room, the last time she'd tried to make contact.

She put on the swimming goggles, which had been blacked out with duct tape. She should have looked comical, but she didn't. She looked heroic, not because she wasn't scared but because she was. She was scared and she was going to do it, anyway.

The adults took over then. Mrs. Byers and Hopper helped her step into the bath. El clasped Mrs. Byers' hand tightly. They hadn't known

each other for more than a couple of hours but they'd already bonded. I could tell that El adored her.

Eleven sat down as gracefully as possible, considering she was sitting in a pool meant for little kids. She leaned back and extended her arms, floating silently. We were grouped in a circle around her. We looked at each other, expecting it would take a few minutes. But there was no waiting this time. The powers surged immediately and the lights crackled. The guys and I looked up, worried that they'd explode.

We were still watching the lights when we suddenly heard footsteps over the radio. We were hearing her walk; wherever she was in her mind. We heard a light splashing like she was walking through a puddle. She was breathing heavily, fearfully. Her physical self in the pool looked serene.

The footsteps halted, and then we heard her voice. Two voices, and both of them were hers.

"Barb?" The voice from the radio asked.

"Barbara?" El's voice in the pool asked.

Nancy leaned forward hopefully.

The footsteps continued, hesitantly. Then we heard a horrible squelching, and a gasp. And then she was shrieking over the radio. One word, over and over and over.

"Gone! Gone! Gone!"

The lights pulsed with each scream.

Her body in the pool was tensed, but when she spoke, her voice was quiet.

"Gone. Gone. Gone."

Nancy clapped a hand over her mouth, crying. Jonathan grabbed her other hand and held it tightly.

El was starting to struggle, turning her head. Her voice-her physical voice-was breaking and rising. Mrs. Byers tried to comfort her.

“It’s okay, it’s okay...it’s okay. I’ve got you.”

We heard her voice double, too. It echoed through the radio less than a second after she’d spoken. And El-both Els-quieted while Mrs. Byers reassured her she was safe.

“Castle Byers,” El’s voice said through the radio. She sounded dreamy and faraway. A second later, her physical self repeated the words.

“Will.” And her physical body, “Will?”

Mrs. Byers gasped and Jonathan bit his lip, looking terrified. He was expecting Will to be dead, just like Barb. But El didn’t scream again. She only repeated his name. She sounded relieved and we knew she’d found him. He was still alive.

“You tell him...tell him I’m coming,” Mrs. Byers said, starting to cry.

“Your mom...she’s coming for you,” Eleven said over the radio.

“Hurry.”

It was Will. He sounded incredibly weak and tired, but he was still there. He was okay.

Mrs. Byers leaned closer to Eleven.

“Okay. Listen. Tell him to...tell him to stay where he is. We’re coming. We’re coming, sweetie. We’re coming.”

Eleven repeated the words, and then waited. When Mrs. Byers didn’t say anything else, El spoke again.

“Just...just hold on a little longer, Will.” She paused. “Will.”

There was a low snarl, audible through the radio. My hands started to hurt and I realized I’d been clenching them tightly, like Eleven had in the car. I tried to relax them but couldn’t.

“Will?”

Eleven’s voice sounded close to tears, and then she was calling for him frantically.

"Will! Will! Will!"

We could hear her whimpering over the radio. Less than a second later, El’s body sprang up from the pool, scaring all of us. We all jumped backward and I unclenched my hands again, not realizing I’d left little bloody marks in my palm from my nails.

El ripped her mask off and shivered, still crying. Mrs. Byers hugged her tightly.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. You did so good.”

It was the first time she’d ever been held that way, like by a parent.

We towed her off as best as we could, wishing we’d had more clothes for her to change into. We led her to the stands and sat her down, taking careful inventory. Her nose was bleeding and she was cold, but she looked okay otherwise. She didn’t look nearly as bad as she had in the AV room.

We surrounded her protectively. Lucas stood behind her and draped a towel over her shoulder like a blanket. He rubbed her arm to make her warmer. I sat next to her, and she leaned her head tiredly and rested it in the crook of my neck. Dustin sat beside me. He patted Eleven on the knee and smiled at her.

The adults-and almost adults-were making their plans while we took care of our friend. Hopper was going to break into the lab and get Will. Mrs. Byers wanted to come with him, but he wanted her to stay. Their voices rose as they started arguing, and we could hear them even as they walked outside. I could tell he was going to lose that battle. She was going to get her son. She’d walk if she had to.

Jonathan and Nancy would stay with us until they came back. I wanted to talk to Nancy, to tell her how sorry I was about Barb, but I knew it wasn’t the right time. She didn’t want to talk about it yet. She went out into the hallway with Jonathan.



Eleven sighed tiredly from the crook of my neck.

"You did great," I said.

"Yeah, totally," Dustin agreed.

"Awesome?"

"Really awesome," Lucas answered from behind us. She turned her hand over on her leg, palm up. He laughed and leaned over to high-five her.

And then we waited without speaking. Eleven was still shivering. I couldn't wait for this night to be over, for all of it to be over. I kept watching the clock. I knew Hopper and Mrs. Byers wouldn't return any time soon, but Jonathan and Nancy had been gone for half an hour and I was getting worried.

I jiggled my leg until Dustin shoved me, complaining that I was bouncing him. I couldn't help it, couldn't stop fidgeting. Something was wrong. I finally jumped up and checked the hallway where Nancy and Jonathan had been. They were gone. I went outside, calling for my sister, but she wasn't there. The parking lot was empty.

"They're gone," I said, striding back into the gym.

"What?"

"Nancy and Jonathan. His car's gone!"

"They're probably just sucking face somewhere," Dustin said reasonably.

"Gross," Lucas moaned.

"No. No way!"

I knew Nancy wouldn't be thinking anything like that, not after hearing about Barb. I thought it was more likely the new Nancy had come up with a plan of her own. Although she could have taken a second to let us know before taking off.

“Did they go with the Chief?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t know,” I snapped, turning around and glaring at the doors in irritation. I wasn’t telepathic, for Christ’s sake.

Although one of us was. A little, anyway.

“No.”

I spun around. El was watching me solemnly. She dropped her eyes when I looked at her.

“What? Did you see them? Do you know where they went?”

El met my gaze reluctantly.

“Yes.”

“Where? Where did they go?”

She paused for a long moment before she answered.

“Demogorgon.”

## 10. Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

For foreverinthe\_eighties, so you can continue the celebration. Happy belated birthday!

A/N: The material in the following chapters will be a mixture of season 1 from Mike's point of view, and original material that takes place in between the show content. If you see something familiar, that's because it is. And I obviously don't own it. If I did, there would have been a hell of a lot more Mileven in season 2.

Shit. Shit. I knew it. She and Jonathan were going to try to trap it, to keep it distracted from Hopper and Mrs. Byers. I should have known the new Nancy wouldn't have been content to sit around and wait for the adults to handle everything. But she should have told us. She should have told me. We could have helped them. Maybe we still could.

I looked at Eleven. She was curled up, clutching her knees to her chest. She was white from fatigue. She needed to stay and rest, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.

"We've got to help them," I said.

"Uh, no. No, we don't. We need to stay here," Lucas snapped.

"I second that. And third it and fourth it."

"Guys! Guys, this is crazy. We can't just wait around!" I told them.

Dustin and Lucas exchanged a look and Lucas sighed.

"Mike," Lucas said, striving to remain calm. "In case you've forgotten,

we're still fugitives. The Bad Men are still looking for us."

"Yeah, and we don't even know where your sister is," Dustin said reasonably.

"El can find them!"

"Mike, look at her," Dustin sighed.

I did. We all did. And I knew he was right. We couldn't ask El to do anything else for us. I couldn't ask her that. El was watching us, but without any interest. Her eyes were unfocused and it was easy to see the dark circles under them in the bright lights in the gym.

"I still think we should stick to the Chief's plan," Dustin continued, when I didn't say anything.

"Exactly. We stay here, and keep El out of sight. And keep her safe." Lucas knew those were the magic words, the only reason I'd stay. "That's the most important thing, remember?"

He was right.

He could tell he had me convinced, but he could still see the anxiousness on my face so he hastened to reassure me.

"Besides, she's okay, she's with Jonathan."

That didn't actually make me feel any better. Jonathan was cool, but as far as I knew, he didn't exactly have any secret prowess in monster hunting.

"Yeah, and she's kind of a badass now, so..." Dustin said.

That did make me feel a little better. And I wasn't sure when they'd left. Maybe Hopper and Mrs. Byers had a huge head start. Maybe they'd take care of the monster before Nancy even had a chance to try.

As soon as they realized I wasn't going to argue with them, they relaxed. Dustin spun on his heel and headed for the hallway.

“Where are you going? You just said stick to the plan!”

Dustin didn’t bother turning around.

“I am! I’m just going to get chocolate pudding. I’m telling you, lunch lady Phyllis hoards that shit.”

I stared at his retreating back. How could he think about food at a time like this?

“Are you serious?”

“El needs to be recharged!” he called over his shoulder, and I shut up. He was right again. None of us had eaten much today, and El hadn’t eaten much yesterday, either. But we still needed something more substantial than pudding. But it would be okay just for tonight. When this was all over, she’d be able to have real food. As much as she wanted. Maybe she’d even find something she liked more than Eggos. And it would be over soon, tonight. We’d have Will back and the Demogorgon would be killed. I wasn’t sure how we’d solve the problem of the government assholes, but Hopper could figure that out. He was the Chief, after all. He was law enforcement. They’d have to listen to him.

I ignored the warning voice that said I was being naïve. The voice that said if they’d been willing to chase us down our upper middle-class streets, if they’d been willing to kill us, they probably wouldn’t listen to Hopper. I ignored that voice, telling myself that they could have killed Hopper. He’d broken into the lab and seen the gate. And they hadn’t killed him. They’d let him go.

Lucas followed Dustin and Eleven stood up behind me, watching me cautiously. She didn’t look unfocused now. I could tell she was worried, worried that I was angry I had to stay behind with her. She was always quick to worry, quick to think we’d be disappointed in her. Quick to believe that she should be doing more for us, whatever we wanted. I think she was always afraid that we’d stop being her friends, that we’d change our minds about her. And I didn’t blame her for that. Not after what she’d been through, and not after I’d yelled at her. I never should have done that. I promised myself I’d never do it again.

I smiled at her as reassuringly as I could, so she could see that it was okay. It was okay that we were staying here, that she didn't need to do anything else besides rest. She carefully scrutinized my face for a few seconds before relaxing. She gave me a tentative smile.

"Come on. If we're going to eat in the school, we should eat in the cafeteria. I'll show you our table."

She followed me to the cafeteria, looking around with awe. I saw the same old cafeteria I saw five days a week, probably identical to every school cafeteria in the country. Boring and white and still smelling of whatever horror the lunch ladies concocted every day. I tried to see it from her eyes instead. I saw the rows of tables that could seat everyone in our grade, more people than she'd ever eaten with.

"This one's ours," I told her, leading her to a table near the back and sitting down. "This is where I sit, that's Lucas...Dustin...Will," I said, pointing around the table. "And you can pick your seat, when you come to school with us." Eleven chose the seat nearest me and I smiled. She looked at me gravely, like she didn't believe she'd ever be able to do anything as normal as going to school.

"We don't eat the food here except for on Fridays, when it's pizza day. Everything else is awful so we just bring our lunch and buy dessert," I continued confidently, trying to convince her she'd be with us at school. When this was all over.

"Found it!" Dustin called gleefully from the kitchen. I smiled a little but El watched me solemnly. She was usually solemn but that expression was different. I still wonder if part of her knew what was going to happen.

"MIKE! I FOUND THE CHOCOLATE PUDDING!" Dustin screeched it, in case I hadn't heard him before. I'm pretty sure his voice carried well beyond city limits.

"OKAY!" I screamed back.

Eleven turned her face toward the kitchen, then back to me.

"Are you feeling any better?"

She glanced down and gave a tiny shrug. I sighed, taking careful inventory of her. She looked better, but still exhausted. I tried to remember everything we'd done since the last time she'd really eaten. Since the last time she'd slept. Although technically, the last time she'd slept had been outside, which probably wasn't very restful. And she'd only eaten about a hundred Eggos and a candy bar and apple lately, as far as I knew.

"What's 'putting?'" Eleven pronounced the word very carefully.

I laughed a little. "Pudding. It's...it's this chocolate goo you eat with a spoon."

Her face wrinkled in disgust and I laughed again.

"Don't worry. When all this is over, you won't have to keep eating junk food and leftovers like a dog anymore. My mom...she's a pretty awesome cook. She can make you whatever you'd like." I took it for granted that my parents would take her in, would take care of her. Why wouldn't they? She was awesome.

"Eggos?" She asked me hopefully.

We really needed to introduce her to some other type of food.

"Well...yeah, Eggos. But real food, too." I sighed. "See...I was thinking...once all this is over and Will's back and you're not a secret anymore, my parents can get you an actual bed for the basement."

She smiled, a little sadly. A little wistfully.

"Or you can take my room if you want, since I'm down there all the time anyways. My point is, they'll take care of you. They'll be like your new parents. And Nancy...she'll be like your new sister." I thought she'd like that. I remembered the way she'd zeroed in on Nancy's picture in the living room. Eleven looked at me for a second.

"Will you...be like my brother?"

Shit. No. That was so much worse than being cousins. I wrinkled my face and shook my head frantically. "What? No! No!" And about a thousand more "no's."

“Why no?” She looked at me very carefully, studying my face. She looked bewildered and I sighed again. This was getting awkward. Actually, “awkward” was kind of an understatement.

I could tell she didn’t understand and I didn’t know how to explain it. I didn’t even know how to begin to explain it. I had sisters. I definitely didn’t think of El as my sister. Not even close.

I looked away and sighed. “Because...because it’s different.”

“Why?”

I sighed again and stared at the floor. It was a reasonable assumption for her to make, since she’d be living with us and I’d just told her my parents would be her parents. “I mean, I don’t know...I guess it’s not...It’s stupid.” I mumbled, giving up. I’d figure out a better way to explain it later.

“Mike?”

I glanced at her quickly.

“Yeah?”

“Friends don’t lie,” she said, staring at me intently.

Sighing, I gave it another shot. I was just glad that Lucas and Dustin were otherwise occupied because I could only imagine how Dustin would try to clarify the difference between sister and...well, something else. And that was all the more reason to try to finish this conversation as quickly as possible, before they came back.

“Well...I was thinking...I don’t know...maybe we can go to the Snow Ball together,” I said, turning red.

“Snow Ball?”

I’d forgotten that she didn’t know what the Snow Ball was, especially since I’d been turning the idea over in my mind for the past few days.

“It’s this cheesy school dance, where you go in the gym and dance to music and stuff,” I explained. “I’ve never been, but I know you’re not



supposed to go with your sister.”

“No?”

“I mean...you can, but it’d be really weird. You go to school dances with someone that you, you know...someone that you like.”

“A friend?”

Not a friend, but that was a hell of a lot better than sister.

“Not a friend. Uh....uh. Uh, someone like a...” She was staring at me, forehead wrinkled, trying to understand while I babbled incoherently.

I gave up. I was never going to get the words out. I’d have to tell her a different way. Without even thinking about it, I leaned forward quickly and kissed her. I pulled back slowly, watching her face for her reaction and hoping for the best.

She looked surprised. She gave a little gasp and my heart sank, but then her face lit up and she smiled at me. I smiled back, relieved. And happy. Fucking ecstatic, actually. I turned pink again and glanced away.

Headlights swept over us, over the cafeteria, through the windows behind us. Someone was pulling into the parking lot.

“Nancy! Hold on, I’ll be right back.” She was still watching me. She looked happy. Almost as happy as I felt. I touched her gently on the shoulder as I hurried around her. “Just stay here.”

I sprinted down the hallway, throwing open the heavy door and running outside. I could see cars pulling in the parking lot in front of the main entrance near the gym. I would have kept running but then it sank in that there was more than one car. There were cars. A lot of cars. And not just cars. Military jeeps. Not Nancy. How did they find us? I watched them in horror, breathing in gasps. I watched them spill out of the vehicles, all in uniform. All presumably carrying guns.

They hadn’t seen me yet. I darted back inside and down the hallway. I ran back to El, but she wasn’t there. The cafeteria was empty. I

stared around stupidly until I remembered the guys were in the kitchen. She was probably with them. I hurried into the kitchen, skidding a little on the waxed floor. Eleven was with them. They were standing in front of what looked like a lifetime supply of pudding. None of them looked up when I ran in.

“Guys! Guys!” I panted.

They immediately looked up, already scared.

“What is it?”

“They found us.”

We stared at each other in panicked silence for a minute, and then we all ran for it. Dustin knocked into the table and a couple of cans of pudding went flying. Lucas hopped over one as it rolled toward him so he didn’t have to stop. We sprinted through the hallway and down the stairs. Lucas and Dustin led the way. I held Eleven’s hand tightly, pulling her forward.

“How did they find us?” Lucas gasped.

“I don’t know, but they knew we were in the gym!”

“Lando,” Dustin said darkly.

Maybe he was right. I couldn’t think about that now. We’d think about that later, when we’d escaped. When we were safe. And we were close. We were close to one of the exits when the doors opened and flashlights shined in. We skidded to a halt.

“Got em!”

We turned and fled, as fast as we could

“Go go go go go go!” I kept screaming it, without even being really aware of it, like it would make us all run faster. Like it would help us escape.

We didn’t even try to be quiet. We didn’t have time to be quiet, we just had to go. We pounded back up the stairs, Eleven in the lead this

time. She stopped abruptly, and we all halted behind her. There were more soldiers moving toward us. They told us to freeze and I almost laughed at the absurdity. Yeah, right. Not fucking likely.

“Back! Go back!” I screamed. “Go, go! Go left!”

El ran for her life, and we ran with her. They were chasing us down the hallway. More people came around the corner in front of us. El skidded to a stop, throwing her arms out to keep her balance. They were flanking us, led by a woman with short blonde hair. She didn’t hesitate, not even for a second. She cocked her gun at us, at Eleven.

I looked behind me to check, but they were there. There were fucking soldiers everywhere and we were trapped. Eleven tensed, pulling herself into a slight crouch. She lowered her face, tucking her chin toward her chest, into a stance I knew very well by now. I thought they’d shoot her then, because they had to know what she was doing. What she was planning to do. But they didn’t. I kept my eyes on the blonde woman in front of us, the one that was closest. Her gun was pointed at El but she didn’t shoot her. Their gazes were locked and the woman couldn’t look away. Her face trembled a little from the effort of trying to free herself and the lights started to flicker.

And I felt something. I don’t even know how to describe it. It felt heavy. It made it harder to breathe for the second it lasted. It made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Lucas and Dustin stared at each other, and then at me, and I knew they felt it, too. I felt something pass over me, consider me, and then leave me alone. Marking me as safe.

There was a horrible squelching sound, and then blood began to leak from the eyes of the people in front of us. It looked like tears, red tears. And even though they all held onto their weapons, not one of them attempted to shoot. The guns in their hands shook as more blood poured from their eyes, faster now.

The woman whimpered slightly. That was the only sound any of them made and then it was over. As one, their bodies collapsed to the floor. They were all dead, the ones in front of us, and the ones behind us. All of them. She had just killed at least a dozen people at the same freaking time. We stared at each other, at the bodies, in shock.

Eleven swayed slightly, and then collapsed while we were all still gaping at each other. We ran to her as one.

“El! El, are you okay?” I shook her shoulder. “El!” She looked worse than she had the last time she fainted. I could see the dark veins in her face again and her ears were bleeding. She looked like she was dying. “Something’s wrong,” I said to Dustin in a choked voice.

“She’s just drained,” Dustin reassured me, as if that wasn’t a big deal at all.

“No, no no. She won’t wake up. El! El! El!” I kept shaking her but she didn’t move and her eyes were closed. I put my hand on her back and leaned my head against her to listen.

“She’s barely breathing,” I said, stunned.

“We gotta go!” Lucas insisted. He grabbed her shoulders to try to pull her up so we could lift her.

“Leave her!”

We all jumped and straightened up at the commanding voice.

It was him.

It was the older man, the one in the suit and tie. The one Eleven had been so afraid of when we ran from the vans. He was with three other men, military guys, but I didn’t pay attention to them because they didn’t matter. He was the one in charge, the one that scared her.

“Step away from the child.”

“No!” I stood up, staying right beside El. Dustin and Lucas were behind me. “You want her; you have to kill us first!” It was an incredibly stupid thing to say, because obviously they didn’t give a shit about that. They wouldn’t even blink before killing us. And then my friends were right beside me. Lucas had to step over Eleven carefully to stand next to me, to show them that we were sticking together. That we weren’t leaving her.

“That’s right!” Dustin yelled.

“Eat shit!” Lucas added, jabbing his fist at the man.

We kept our eyes on the men in front of us. At least until I heard footsteps, too late, from behind me. I was grabbed roughly. I tried running forward but I was already caught and held tightly. Lucas and Dustin cried out and I knew they’d been caught. We’d all been caught. Our attempted act of heroism had lasted less than a second and had been a complete failure. And they were going to take her.

“Oh, no! No no!” I screamed.

“No, no! Get off me!” Dustin yelled from beside me.

“You idiot!” I yelled. I didn’t know who I was referring to, the guy holding me, the man in the suit, or myself, for not being able to keep her safe.

“Get off me! Let go!”

The man bent solicitously over Eleven and checked her pulse. When he was satisfied that she was still alive, he gently lifted her into a sitting position and held her upright. He put one hand on each side of her face, staring at her face intently.

“Eleven! Eleven, can you hear me?”

The concern in his voice was awful to hear. Shocking. How could he actually care what happened to her? He was the one in charge, the one that had started all of this. He was the one trying to hurt her. But I knew he did care. Not about her, but what she was. What she could do. He wanted that power again.

When Eleven didn’t respond, he shook her lightly, being careful not to hurt her. Her eyes were still closed. He leaned closer to her, never taking his eyes off her pale face. He took no notice of us, none whatsoever. We didn’t exist to him. He was only speaking to her.

“Eleven?”

And she heard him. Her eyes fluttered open a little.

“Papa?” she asked weakly.

I stopped struggling to get away. Papa. This was the man who'd given her a nightmare. This man was the reason she'd only ever had nightmares.

Papa smiled at her, overjoyed.

"Yes! Yes, it's your Papa."

The look on her face broke my paralysis.

"Get off of me!" I yelled, shoving myself away from the guy holding me. He grabbed me back easily.

"I'm here now," Papa crooned to her.

"Let her go! Let her go, you bastard!" My voice broke on the words. Eleven turned her head toward me. She looked at me beseechingly and whimpered. Papa stroked her face, turning her face back toward him.

"Shh...shh...you're sick."

Eleven tried to pull away from him but he held her firmly.

"You're sick, but I'm going to make you better. I'm going to take you back home, where I can make you well again." He said it in a comforting voice, like it was what she wanted, to go back to the lab and live like a lab rat again. "Where we can make all of this better, so no one else gets hurt."

He was the one hurting her, though. He was the one who had always hurt her. Eleven finally met his eyes. He looked at her hopefully, nodding his head in reassurance. He actually thought she wanted to go with him. She stared at him.

"Bad," she muttered, and he drew back a little. She repeated the word weakly and held out her hand for me. She was reaching out for me. She turned her face to mine.

"Mike...Mike."

And I couldn't help her. I couldn't do anything. I can't even begin to

describe how that felt. How that still feels, even now. She needed me, she was pleading with me, and I couldn't do anything but watch. I struggled to get free, crying.

"Mike." Her voice broke.

Papa stroked her face again and she jerked her head back. At the same moment she pulled away, the lights pulsed above us. I thought it was her, at first, that she was using her power again. But when I looked at her, I knew I was wrong. She couldn't. She didn't have anything left, not right then.

And if it wasn't El, that only left one other option.

Papa looked away from her then, we all did. The lights were still flickering on and off, signaling its arrival. Nancy had said it was like a shark.

There was blood everywhere.

"Blood."

"What?" Lucas asked me. Neither one of us took any notice of the soldiers still holding us captive. They didn't matter anymore.

"Blood!"

There was blood everywhere, and it was coming. Something thudded at the wall in front of us, breaking off pieces of the tile. The soldiers closest to it backed up and watched it in horror, raising their guns. Something was pounding on the wall, pounding its way through the wall. And we caught a glimpse of it, in the last second before it pushed through. After all of our talking about it, after the past week, we'd never even seen it. And now it was here. It freed itself from the wall and stood in front of us, screeching.

"Demogorgon," Dustin moaned.

It stood like a human, tall and impossibly thin at the waist. Its skin looked like flayed flesh. It didn't have a face, or not a recognizable one, anyway. Its whole head seemed to be the face. As we watched in horror, the head opened up, like petals on a flower. It shrieked again.

And suddenly, I didn't have to struggle to get away from the soldier anymore. He let me go without a second thought and grabbed for his gun. Lucas squeezed around his soldier and against the wall as they opened fire.

"Go go go go!" I screamed.

The soldiers ran to the Demogorgon, ignoring Eleven completely. She was on the floor again, because Papa had let her go to retreat from the monster. I got behind her and lifted her head up. Lucas and Dustin got on her sides. I pushed her up, toward Dustin, putting her arm around his neck. As thin as she was, he was the only one who could carry her easily and quickly.

We fled.

I ran in front of Dustin and El and Lucas got behind them to cover him. We ran from the screaming and the gunfire. And then some of the screams turned into shrieks of pain, and I knew they were losing. I didn't care. I hoped they were all killed. The Demogorgon could eat them all, if it wanted, as long as we could escape.

Dustin started to slow as we ran down the hall. He couldn't carry her much longer.

And then we made a huge mistake.

I made a huge mistake.

The exit was right down the hall and around the corner. We could have made it. We could have tried. I should have gotten her out of there. And I considered it. I did. But I thought they'd be able to kill it eventually. It was completely naïve of me, completely childish, to assume the adults with guns could handle it. But that's what I thought. Dustin couldn't carry her for much longer. And the classroom was closer.

So that's where I led them, into Mr. Clarke's classroom.

We had to put her down and try to hide. And when they'd killed the monster, while they were still distracted, we'd escape. She'd be safe. I threw the door open as I ran inside. Dustin tried to carry her inside as



gently as possible, but he must have bumped her on the door.

“Sorry. We’re almost there. Hold on, we’re almost there,” he told her comfortingly. The second they made it inside, Lucas slammed the door and backed away from it. Even the lights in the classroom, down the hall from the monster, were flickering.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I yelled, motioning for Dustin to bring her closer. Eleven started to slide and Lucas hurried to keep her from falling, keeping his hands steady on her back.

“Help, help,” Dustin said, panting. “Get her on the table.”

I swept everything off of the table and onto the floor as they lifted her. She groaned when they set her down, like she was in pain. I ran around the table to get in front of her and touched her hand. She immediately grabbed both of mine with hers and held them, looking at me with sunken eyes. I was trying not to cry because she looked awful. She looked like she was dying.

“Just hold on a little longer, okay? He’s gone. The Bad Man is gone.”

It was true, and if it wasn’t true yet, it would be shortly. We could hear the agonized screams from down the hallway. I hoped they would kill it. I hoped they could.

She tightened her grip on my hands when the screaming started again. I kept talking, trying to drown it out. Trying to drown everything out, everything that was happening.

“We’ll be home soon...and my mom...”

My voice broke again because she was crying weakly. Because we probably weren’t going to make it out of this room, and she knew it.

“She’ll get you your own bed. And you can eat as many Eggos as you want.”

She laughed a little through her tears.

“And...we can go to the Snow Ball.”

She smiled. Her eyes never left mine. And she spoke, in a tiny, breaking voice.

“Promise?”

I sniffled and smiled back at her.

“Promise.”

She smiled again. I’d forgotten all about Lucas and Dustin. I knew, logically, that they were in the room with us, but they also weren’t. It was just us, for a few moments.

The monster screeched again, and I jumped, dropping her hands.

It was close.

It was still alive and it was close.

I screamed and turned around, facing the door. If all those men with guns couldn’t kill it, I knew we didn’t have a chance. But I knew I would try. For her. For my friends.

We heard a last burst of gunfire, and then a body dropped. We heard the thud clearly. The monster screeched again. And then there was silence. And somehow that was worse than the screaming, because we didn’t know what it meant. We didn’t know what was going on, and who had survived. Or what had survived.

“Is it...is it dead?” Dustin stuttered.

There was another awful moment of silence, and then the door crashed and broke completely off the hinges. I knew then, that it wanted us. It wanted her. She had made contact with it, she had let it out, and it wanted to kill her. It crouched on all fours in the doorway.

“Go go go go go!” I screamed, backing up and turning toward my friends. Dustin frantically waved his hands in the air, miming the removal of a backpack. Lucas ripped it off as quickly as he could and unzipped it.

“Get the wrist rocket! Get the wrist rocket now!” Dustin screamed at

him as Lucas fumbled in his backpack.

“Go go go go go!” I stood a little in front of them, staring at the Demogorgon. Even though the lights were still flickering on and off, I could see it better than I wanted. Better than I’d ever wanted. It slowly approached us, walking with weirdly ungraceful steps. It roared as it came toward us.

“Take it out now!” Dustin yelled.

Lucas grabbed the wrist rocket and Dustin yanked the backpack from him, scrabbling for the ammunition while Lucas got into position and faced the Demogorgon.

I suddenly remembered what I’d said to Lucas just a few days ago.

Do you seriously want to fight the Demogorgon with your wrist rocket?

And now we were. It was the only thing we could do.

“Get the rocks, get the rock, get the rocks!” I pounded on Dustin’s shoulder like I was riding a horse and urging it to speed the fuck up. Dustin whipped his head toward me angrily.

“I’m getting the rocks!” He screamed at me.

“Give me one!”

Dustin handed the first one to Lucas.

“Come on!” Dustin yelled, either for him to hurry, or for encouragement, I didn’t know.

“Go! Go! Kill it! Kill it!” I screamed.

“Fire it! Fire!”

Lucas ignored us both. He seemed surprisingly calm now that he was in position. He drew back the sling and aimed. He fired and hit it right in the face, or lack of face. Its head moved like he’d slapped it, but it never even stumbled. It roared and extended its claws.

“Get another one!” Lucas yelled, and Dustin handed him another rock.

“Kill it! Kill the bastard!”

“Kill it! Go go go!”

“Kill it now!”

Lucas drew back the sling again. He hit it, and it didn’t even twitch. Dustin already had another rock ready.

“Kill it! Kill the bastard!”

“It’s not working!” Lucas screamed, finally turning to look at us. The look on his face scared me more than the screeches of the monster. Lucas looked terrified and resigned and calm all at once. The expression on his face said that we weren’t going to win. We were going to die. And maybe we were, but we still had some rocks left. We had to keep trying.

“Hit him again!” I yelled.

“Kill it!”

He hit it. It kept advancing, closer and closer. Dustin grabbed another rock, yelling incoherently as he shoved it at Lucas. Lucas took it from him with steady hands. He drew back the sling again, taking his time and aiming almost casually.

The monster was right in front of us now. We were out of time, this was the last chance we’d get. It opened its lack of face. In the flickering light, we could see teeth as it growled. A lot of teeth. Lucas aimed right for the opening and fired. And he hit it.

Seemed to hit it, anyway, because it bellowed and soared backward. It hit the desks and sent them flying before crashing into the blackboard. It threw open its arms in pain when it hit.

We looked at Lucas in awe. I think we all were convinced he’d hit it, that he’d hurt it. I grabbed them both and pulled them backward, just in case it was going to come for us again. It didn’t move; it was flat against the blackboard, arms stretched wide as if pinned.

Something moved behind me, startling me. Startling all of us.

Eleven.

She had pulled herself off the desk, and I knew then that Lucas hadn't hurt the Demogorgon at all. Maybe he hadn't even hit it. I knew what had happened, what was still happening.

She was saving us.

She walked past me, past us, without looking at us even though we were all watching her. Her ears were bleeding. Her nose was bleeding. Her eyes were hollowed and her skin looked almost transparent. I could see every vein in her face. Every vein in her neck. They looked black in the flickering light. She didn't look like she was dying anymore. She looked like she was already dead.

She walked forward, through the open path in between the fallen desks. She kept her eyes fixed on the Demogorgon, kept it pinned with her power. I watched her pass me with horror. She couldn't do this. She was too drained. And she didn't have to. We could run now, while we had the chance. We could run. We could escape. And she'd be okay.

"Eleven, stop!" I screamed, chasing after her. I reached for her. My hand was so close to her arm. Another few inches and I would have been able to grab her. She didn't even look at me, she just extended a hand and then I was the one flying backward across the length of the classroom.

I slid into the cabinet, Dustin and Lucas gawking at me. And I knew what she was doing. She wasn't going to let me help her. She wasn't going to escape. And she wasn't going to let the Demogorgon escape, either. Not this time.

The monster screeched in anger. She never paused in her approach. I sat with my back to the cabinets, arms still up and hands on either side of my face, from the force of hitting the cabinet. I watched her come within a foot of the monster. It screeched again as she drew near and struggled to move, to free itself.

She didn't let it.

She stared at it, chin lowering to her chest, and then she finally paused. Then she finally looked back. She looked at me for the first time since the Demogorgon had broken through the door. She looked broken, too. But she also looked determined.

She watched me sadly, eyes drinking me in, and I saw the resignation on her face. It was the longest moment of my life. Sometimes it feels like I'm still in that moment, even now, because in that moment, everything changed. Nothing would ever be the same, even if I survived.

I think Dustin and Lucas understood before I did. I heard them both gasp. They knew what she was doing, what she planned to do. I watched her through the flickering lights until I understood the expression on her face. In her eyes.

They were sad and determined and apologetic. My own eyes widened and I could feel my hands slowly drop back down. I couldn't control them; I didn't have the power to hold them up anymore. I should have gotten up; I should have tried to run to her, to drag her out of the classroom if I had to. If I even could have. If she'd even let me. But I didn't. I didn't move. I couldn't do anything, because at that moment, everything changed. In that moment, I knew.

She knew she wasn't going to live.

She was telling me that with her eyes.

She was never going to come to school with us, or sit at our table at lunch. She was never going to try any fucking pudding. She'd never play D&D with us. She was never going to meet Will. She wasn't going to eat another Eggo. We'd never finish The Hobbit. We weren't going to go to the Snow Ball.

She was never going to come live with me, because she wasn't going to live at all.

She was still staring at me, and I knew why. She was staring at me, trying to memorize me in the last seconds of her life, and letting me

do the same.

She was saying goodbye.

And when she saw that I understood, that I knew, she spoke.

“Goodbye, Mike.”

Her voice was devastated. Her voice broke my heart.

“Oh, Mike.”

Scott drops the sheaf of pages into his lap and rubs his forehead. He’s aware that he’s near tears, even though it’s just a story. And even if it’s not, he’s seen her. He knows she’s alive. But knowing and feeling are two different things. He stands up and pours a glass of wine, drinking slowly and collecting himself, until he can resume reading.

“Goodbye, Mike.”

Her voice was devastated. Her voice broke my heart.

She watched me for a few more seconds while I started to cry. I tried to blink past the tears, because it was hard enough to see her in the flickering light. The tears were blocking me from seeing her, seeing her alive one last time.

And then it was over. The long moment. Even though it’s still not over, because I can still feel it. It still hurts. She slowly turned her face away from mine, breaking eye contact at the last possible second. She bowed her head sorrowfully, and then faced the Demogorgon.

“No more.”

She held out a hand, palm extended toward it. It screeched again, but it sounded different. It was a shriek of agony, and Lucas and Dustin screamed, too. We covered our ears but we could still hear it. We could feel that scream in our heads. I curled my face toward my

knees and then remembered. This was her last moment.

I looked up again.

She was reaching for the monster, and the monster was reaching for her. Her fingers were stretched apart, trembling with the effort as its claws extended toward her.

It screamed.

And then she was screaming, too.

The monster was flattened against the blackboard again, a glowing circle forming in its chest. Pieces of flesh began to strip away from it. They looked like ashes. The pieces floated around them.

I watched her, sobbing, clutching my ears in my hands. The monster's screams weren't bothering me anymore. I wasn't even aware of them. I had to block out her screams. I could feel them, echoing in my head. Screams of pain and rage and effort. And then I couldn't take it anymore; I couldn't watch what was happening. I closed my eyes and sobbed. I heard their screams mingle, both with my ears and in my head. They became one.

The lights flickered, faster and faster until I heard the surge of electricity. The lights were back on; I could see the brightness behind my eyelids. And the classroom was quiet. I was afraid to open my eyes, afraid to see what had happened. But I had to.

When I opened my eyes, the monster was gone.

And so was she.



## 11. Chapter 11

### Summary for the Chapter:

The sequel to Kissing Cousins.

The classroom was empty except for us.

My paralysis was broken. I scrambled up and ran to the front of the class, where she'd last been, like she was still there. Like I could bring her back.

"El! El!"

The guys were right behind me, calling for her.

"El? EL!"

"Eleven!"

I cried her name over and over, hoping she would hear me. Hoping she'd come back. But she didn't. She was gone.

"EL! WHERE ARE YOU?" When my voice broke, I realized I was screaming through my tears. Or maybe I'd been crying all along.

The guys were quiet then. I was the only one still calling for her.

"ELEVEN! EL!"

But she was still gone. My mind flashed to Eleven, the way she'd shrieked the word, over and over, when she'd found Barb. Gone. I hated that word. I hated it so much that I finally fell silent. I had to. I couldn't stand calling for her and knowing that she wasn't going to answer.

That's when Dustin tried to pull me into a hug. I didn't resist, but I didn't hug him back, either. I didn't want him to hug me, because that meant he was comforting me. And if he was comforting me, it meant that we'd lost her. It meant that I'd lost her. I held myself rigidly, not giving in, until Lucas got on my other side and held us

both. It was so much like the hug Dustin and I had shared with El that I relaxed against them and tried to take the comfort they were offering. We were all crying.

I couldn't believe that she was gone. That she was dead. There wasn't a body, she couldn't be dead. She had been alive, looking at me, less than two minutes ago. Just a few minutes ago, she was clutching my hands. I could still feel them. She couldn't be gone, because I could still feel her.

She couldn't be dead.

We waited for a long time. We searched the whole school, even though she'd disappeared from the science room. We called for her everywhere, until the police came. Not just the government guys, but the regular police, minus Hopper. The deputies gawked at the carnage and tried to question us, but the government guys took over. I knew they'd be speaking to us later. I knew they'd be looking for Eleven, just like I would. Our parents were called and when my mom came, I clung to her, crying.

I couldn't tell her, then, and later, I was glad. We were told the official story of what happened, and that no one else could know. That it was a dangerous secret, and we had to keep it. The rumors around town were more outrageous than the truth. There were no monsters, and there wasn't a government conspiracy. They didn't bother to explain the bodies in the school, they just claimed it was classified information and flashed their badges. El had been a Russian spy, not a girl raised in secret to be a weapon against them. She was dangerous. My mom knew she'd been living in the basement, and I could tell my mom didn't believe their story. She tried to grill me in the concerned mom way, but I never told her. I just told her the only part of the truth that mattered to me. That El was my friend. And she was gone.

Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve showed up at the school shortly after my mom did. I was too numb to feel any surprise at seeing King Steve Harrington with them, looking a lot more shaken than I'd ever seen him. They had laid a trap for the Demogorgon and weakened it, before it escaped and found us.

Then we just waited. There was only one thing that mattered; now that El was gone. We only wanted to know that Will was safe. That all of it hadn't been for nothing. We hoped that Hopper would come for us, but he didn't. Eventually his deputies heard from him and passed along a message. Hopper and Mrs. Byers had found Will. He was alive. He was in the hospital.

All of us went to see him, everyone who knew the secret, including Steve. My parents insisted on coming too, and I didn't care. I understood. Their oldest kids had been involved in something dangerous, and they weren't willing to let us out of sight yet.

And then we waited. Again. Will was unconscious. The guys slept, because it was almost three in the morning by then and we were exhausted. I couldn't sleep, because I saw her face every time I closed my eyes. Although I saw it anyway.

I was still awake when they told we could see Will, that he was conscious and responding. He was back, and I was happy. Really. But it wasn't the same. One of us was still missing. I'd lost one friend to reclaim another.

We told him about El, because he was in on the secret. He had to be, because he'd been part of the secret. He'd been to the Upside Down. He'd seen the Demogorgon. But later, when he was less groggy, he already knew about her. He remembered holding her hand, when she told him to hold on a little longer, that his mom was coming.

I told him she was gone. I hated the word but it was better than the alternative. We didn't say the word. Not then. We weren't sure what had happened to her. One by one they said it. They gave up. And I never did, not aloud. I said she was missing. I said she was gone. I said she was taken. But I never, ever said that word, because if I didn't, if I didn't say it, it wouldn't be true. She wouldn't be dead.

We were questioned about her later, about what had happened to her. We didn't tell them anything. We didn't even tell them she was gone. The first night I was questioned at home, and I told them that I'd never help them. I was angry that they'd even think I would, but the feeling passed abruptly because something was different. I could suddenly feel her. I could feel that she was there. I looked out the window and I couldn't see anything, not really. It was too dark. But I

could almost see her, feel her watching me. And then the feeling was gone, as quickly as it came.

And things slowly went back to normal. Will was released from the hospital and we started playing the game again. I wrote El into all of our campaigns, in all of our stories. I wrote about the monster, describing the way it had reached for El. In some way, she's been written into every one of my stories since then.

Like I said, things went back to normal. Most things, anyway. I didn't go back to normal. I didn't know how. And I didn't want to. Going back to normal meant forgetting her, and that was never going to happen. I started cutting class, when I couldn't stand to be in that room anymore. I got into fights, but only with Troy and James. I felt like I had to. I think I was hoping that they'd kick my ass, and she'd come back. She'd have to, to save me. But that wasn't the only reason. I just wanted to hurt them, because they were assholes. And because somehow those assholes existed in a world where a hero like Eleven no longer did.

I learned more about her, from Hopper and Mrs. Byers. Now that we had time, we could talk about her. Hopper seemed to want to leave the subject behind, but I wouldn't let him. I stalked him at work, and at his house, almost every night for a week until he gave in. When I think about that now, I feel sick. I was so close, and I didn't even know it.

She hadn't been born in the lab, but she'd been taken from her mom as an infant and raised there until she'd escaped. She's never had a parent, except for her Papa. Some father. I knew already, she'd just been an experiment to him. A prize. A weapon. She'd never had real toys or a birthday or anything else that a normal kid would have had. She didn't have anything, until she'd opened the gate and escaped. Until she'd found us.

I could only hope that she'd find us again, somehow. I left the fort up, just in case. I still hoped that one day, she'd come home. Each day she was gone, I tried to remember one thing about her, so I wouldn't forget anything. And I called her every night, on channel 11. I talked to her every night for 353 days. I talked to her about everything, about what had happened that day, about how much I missed her. How I hoped she was okay. I read *The Hobbit* and tried

to imagine her reaction. I played her my favorite music. I always waited for a reply. Sometimes I thought I almost heard one. I talked to her like she was in the same room, like I could see her. And sometimes I felt her. I felt her hand on my face. I almost saw her right in front of me.

But I didn't. She was still gone.

And it seemed to be over.

Although it wasn't. It wasn't over yet, although that's a different story. I'll include the relevant parts, because they're part of this story. I won't write the rest of that story here. That story is Will's story, and this is the story of Eleven.

353 days later, we were in danger again. In worse danger than ever before. We were at Will's house. Will was there, too, but he wasn't Will, not anymore. He was the Mind Flayer. We were surrounded by monsters, and the gate had grown. The gate had allowed the monsters to pour into our world, allowed the Upside Down to spread to our dimension. The monsters killed almost everyone in the lab, and Mrs. Byer's boyfriend, who had been a hero, too. And the monsters had found us. We had no way out, we were completely surrounded. All of us. Everyone that knew about the Upside Down was in that room.

We clutched any weapon we could find, hearing the monsters screech outside. And then the screeching stopped and it was silent, until the window broke as one flew through it. We all jumped and turned our weapons onto it, but it was dead. Something had killed it, and thrown it through the window.

We turned to the door, terrified. We were crammed into the living room, and I was behind my friends. I couldn't see very well, but I could hear. I heard the lock slide free, as someone unlocked it from the outside. I stood on my toes to watch and gripped my weapon. The door swung open, and I kept my eyes close to the floor, because the monsters would be on the ground. They weren't fully grown yet, they couldn't stand up.

Instead of a monster, I saw a pair of white sneakers. A pair of legs in

jeans. My friends and Hopper lowered their weapons, because they could see this person wasn't a threat. I tried to push them out of the way to get a better look but they were in my way. I peered over them and slowly raised my eyes from the dirty sneakers to the person's face. Slowly, because I was hoping, and because I was so afraid to be wrong. But I wasn't. My heart was pounding and I felt alive, for the first time in 353 days. I couldn't look away. Her hair was a little longer and she was taller. I saw the solemn, tearful face. The dark eyes.

Eleven had returned. She was alive. She was here.

Her eyes were searching for me.

I didn't have to push past anyone this time. They got out of my way, and I stepped through the path they made. I couldn't even tell you who was beside me at that moment and it didn't matter.

Eleven's eyes found me and she smiled at me through her tears. And I smiled through mine.

"Eleven," I said weakly, walking toward her slowly, like she was going to disappear at any moment. She moved toward me at the same pace.

"Mike," she breathed, and then she was in my arms, and I was hugging her tightly, crying onto her shoulder. I don't think she minded, because she was doing the same thing. And I never wanted to let her go, but I did. I had to.

"I never gave up on you," I told her. And I hadn't, not really. Part of me had believed she was dead, but I had never let myself believe it completely. I'd kept her fort up. I'd called her for almost a year. I'd hoped.

"I called you, every night. Every night for--"

"For 353 days," she finished. "I know. I heard."

I couldn't believe it, even though part of me had known. I had felt her. I had almost heard her. I didn't understand why she hadn't come home, until Hopper explained. Right before I tried to beat the shit out

of him. He'd kept her hidden for the past year. He'd kept her a secret. He'd kept her a secret from me. To keep her safe, and to keep us safe.

And while I understand, I'll also never understand. And I'll never forgive him. There was nothing he could do to protect her that I wouldn't do, and more. He should have told me. I should have known.

But although it still hurts, to know that I was without her for a year, I'm happy, because she's home. She's still a secret for a little while longer, but eventually she'll have a normal life. And she has a birth certificate now. She's officially Hopper's daughter.

And I get to see her, whenever I want. I get to talk to her, and hold her hand. I get to call her on the phone. We get to do normal things with her. We've had snowball fights. We've built snowmen. We've taught her how to ride a bike, although she doesn't have one yet. We get to take her out in public, to do normal things, as long as we're careful and Hopper's nearby and it's not a crowded place, anyway. Those are a lot of conditions, but we don't care.

She's home.

I asked her to the Snow Ball. Again. It wasn't as easy as it was last year, but I had a little help from my friends. She said yes, but then Hopper changed his mind. He was worried about her being in the school again, in the gym. And around so many people, some of whom might recognize her.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. The Snow Ball had taken on a mythical quality to me. We hadn't been able to go last year, and we should have. We should have had that chance. I guess I thought that if we made it this year, it meant that we were okay. That she was okay. That she wouldn't disappear again. I was disappointed, but I went, anyway. The guys didn't take no for an answer, because they had a surprise for me.

Eleven had a surprise for me.

And you already know how this part of the story goes. She showed up right when all my friends were dancing, right when I was deciding

that I'd made my token appearance and I could leave.

We were at the Snow Ball together. I was finally able to keep my promise.

We danced. She danced with the guys and then we danced again. I kissed her. And later, she kissed me. And I know what a cliché is, okay? I've made A's in all of my English classes and I know the definition. I know it's a weakness to an otherwise good story. But they don't teach you everything about clichés in class. They don't teach you that they're also real. And you aren't an English teacher, so you won't mind. Here's the cliché. Here's the truth.

I kissed her again, and it felt like coming home.

That's the last page.

Scott carefully turns back to the beginning and smooths the creased pages. He carefully places them into his briefcase. He does everything carefully, because he's thinking carefully, too.

It's just a story, of course. He knows that. It's ludicrous to believe it's anything but fiction. Although there are elements of truth within it, as with any good story. Still thinking carefully, he considers them, one by one. The sensory deprivation tank, for instance. Dustin did indeed call him that night to learn how to build one. His radio, brand-new and supposedly indestructible. The man who'd come to take a look at it, after normal business hours. And the woman who had come to his house shortly after, questioning him about his AV students. About who they were, and where they lived. He'd believed her story, but now he wonders. Now he realizes how unusual her visit was. Why did she come to his house? Why didn't she visit him at the school, after class? Because for her, the matter was urgent. She couldn't wait.

He thinks of the massacre in the school, the damage in the classroom. The odd scorched mark on the blackboard before it was replaced. Will's funeral and the body they'd pulled from the quarry. The hasty closure of the lab, and the announcement of a cover-up that didn't



make any sense at all, when you stopped to think about it. And he's definitely thinking about it now.

The story is fictional. He knows that. But leaving aside the irrationality, it also makes sense. It makes sense because of Mike. Because of the boys. They've grown up a lot this past year. Sometimes they have an adult gravity that's almost frightening, as if they've seen things no other kid has seen. Not to mention Mike's behavioral changes. He's been happy and carefree the last couple of months, after a year of depression and acting out.

The story is fictional, but the girl isn't. He's met her twice, and he saw her a third time, at the Snow Ball. He saw them together, and the way they interacted was not two kids dancing with each other at a middle-school dance. It was two people, holding each other as if it was their last moment together. It was two people in love.

He shoves that thought away from him hastily, because it's an irrational thought, and he is a man of science. It's just a piece of fiction, but one he's thoroughly enjoyed. He's touched by his own significant role in Mike's story.

Scott neatly places his briefcase near the door, where it will be ready for him tomorrow. He cleans the few dinner dishes and rinses his wine glass before drying it. It's late now, very late, and he'll only get a few hours of sleep, but he's a methodical man and he takes his time tidying and getting ready for bed.

He pulls back the sheet and turns the light off, expecting that he'll drop off to sleep immediately. He's never had trouble sleeping before, and he's very tired. The story is just a story, and he doesn't need to think about it anymore, which is why his thoughts turn to it, again and again that night. Examining it carefully.

He doesn't sleep very well at all that night, which is a personal first for him. He's bleary eyed the next day at school and catches himself yawning during his classes. His last lesson of the day is the one with his favorite students, even though he's not supposed to have favorites.

Dustin has neglected to mention his phone call the night before, so

Mike isn't sure if Mr. Clarke's had time to read it or not yet. Mike checks his face quickly when he comes in with his friends, trying to see if it looks any different. There's a thoughtful expression on Mr. Clarke's face, as if his mind is elsewhere, that tells Mike what he needs to know. He lingers after class, motioning for his friends to go on without him. Scott smiles at him as he approaches his desk.

"That was wonderful, Mike."

It would be natural to say "that was a wonderful story, Mike," but it's not what he says. He can't. He doesn't call it a story, even though it must be. Most of it must be, anyway.

"Thanks," Mike says, considering his expression carefully. They both pause for a moment in silence. Scott can tell Mike's waiting for him, so he wracks his brain for something appropriate to say.

"May I keep it?"

Mike's expression changes. It's an odd look, half wary and half embarrassed.

"Sorry. I need it back."

And he does need the pages back. He needs to keep them safe. No one else can ever see those pages. Scott can see that clearly. It's written all over Mike's face. Without another word, he unclasps his briefcase and removes the stapled pages from where he's hidden them. It's illogical, and he can't explain the rationality behind it, but it's also true. He's kept the pages hidden and his briefcase in sight all day.

Scott hands the pages over reluctantly, because he'd like to keep them. Study them. He watches Mike tuck them deep into his backpack and realizes that somehow, Mike's in charge of this encounter now. It's a very unsettling thought.

"Thank you for sharing it with me," he says finally, after a pause that should be awkward but isn't.

Mike nods, looking solemn.

“Do you have any feedback?”

The words are almost a code and they both know it. They mean, do you have any questions? Is there anything else you want to know? That you don't understand? Scott hears the hidden meaning behind the words and pauses again. He looks into the serious, disquietingly adult face of his favorite student.

“I would love to read the sequel,” is all Scott says.

They grin at each other at the same time, and the illusion is broken. Mike's a kid again, and Scott is the teacher.

After that, things go back to normal. He doesn't put the story out of his mind, but he makes his peace with it. It must be fiction, with fragments of the truth sprinkled in. The girl isn't his cousin, but she's assuredly not possessed of any psi powers, either. But maybe she was in trouble last year. And maybe Mike did help her somehow, and lose her. The story is Mike's way of making peace with what's happened, with the stress and grief of the past year. It's what any psychologist would say. It's a common coping technique and perfectly rational. It also sounds like bullshit, but he pushes that thought away.

So he just goes on. Not forgetting it, but not dwelling on it, either. A couple of days pass and he can feel himself returning to normal, returning to solid ground and rationality. And then he's asleep in bed and a half-formed thought floats across his mind, and he jolts awake as he remembers something. Something that makes his mouth dry and his hands tremble slightly. He sits up in bed and switches on the lamp.

The girl had been at the Snow Ball. He had seen her. She'd looked happy, a lot happier than the first time he'd met her. He remembers the only time the smile left her face, when she scowled at Troy. It was completely normal and rational, because she's close to Mike and his friends, and Troy has never been anything but a bully. He's hurt them, and she would know that. The expression on her face is logical and easily explained.

But what happened next was not. Troy looked scared, terrified in fact, of a small girl. He had tried to back away from her glare. And he

had tripped when retreating, falling not backward, but forward. Into the punch. While the girl scowled at him, chin tucked toward her chest.

And her nose had bled.

Scott switches off the lamp, shutting off that thought along with the light.

He doesn't go back to sleep very easily.

The next day, he catches sight of Troy and James, pulling books out of their lockers. They're talking quietly, and doing nothing else. They aren't doing any of the things they used to do. They aren't doing anything wrong at all, but he strides over to them.

"Detention. Both of you. For the rest of the week," he says. The words are clipped, because he wasn't aware he was even going to speak and he's already trying to reign in the words.

They both look at him in bewilderment.

"For what?" James asks him finally.

And Scott doesn't have an answer, because the answer isn't rational in the slightest. The answer is that they could have killed Mike, they could have killed Dustin. In Mike's story. The crime is fictional and over a year old. But he can't say that, so he doesn't say anything. He just writes them detention slips.

Somehow he makes it through the rest of the week. He does his errands on Saturday, saving his shopping for last. He's making dinner for his girlfriend tonight and he's looking forward to it. He checks his pocket for his grocery list, and when he has it in hand, he locks the car. He passes the Chief in the parking lot, leaning against his car and smoking. Scott waves and Hopper waves back, squinting against the smoke. Hopper's gaze returns to the store.

When he gets inside and grabs a cart, he sees Dustin, Lucas, and Will. Three of his four favorite students, which means the fourth is somewhere nearby. They don't notice him, they're arguing over who is going to buy the only copy of the latest X-Men comic. From the

way they're tussling over it, there's a good chance they'll each get at least a few of the pages. He glances around idly for Mike as he passes them on his way to the pasta aisle, and finds him. He's standing next to a small display of movies, pointing at them and talking. The dark-haired girl is with him.

Scott pauses without even meaning to. It's more than a pause, because a pause indicates that he will move again, and his feet aren't obeying him right now. He's come to a dead stop as he observes them. As he observes them together. Scott is a science teacher. A scientist. That means he sees a lot. It means he sees everything.

And this is what he sees: two people who watch each other intently. The girl's eyes never leave his face, and Mike gazes at her just as raptly. They can't stop looking at each other, as if it might be the last time. Because once, it was the last time, for almost a year. Mike isn't speaking anymore, but they seem to be communicating anyway. Somehow. The girl stares at him and Mike nods, as if she's said something. He reaches out and pulls a movie from the display case. And without a word, and at the same instant, they both turn around to walk away together. They're completely in sync, in a way that people never are, even when they've been married for years. It's not a very natural thing, because it's the opposite of normal, but somehow it is. He sees it.

They're approaching him now, still looking at each other. They'll notice him soon unless he moves, and he has no intention of moving. He can't, because he's suddenly struggling with both sides of himself. The rational, logical mind of a scientist. The adult. And the mind of someone who loves science fiction, who loves fantasy, someone who has an open mind to the irrational. The child. He tries to reconcile both parts of himself, because there's some overlap. He didn't miss the way Hopper kept a careful eye on the door, keeping watch over the girl. He observed that. As a scientist. Even though it supports the irrational.

They're right in front of him now and they turn away from each other in surprise, looking up at him. The girl stares at him solemnly. He doesn't know who she is, not really, not with his full mind, but he knows she's a sweet girl. A thoughtful girl.

“Hey, Mr. Clarke!” Mike grins at him.

“Hey yourself, Mike,” Scott says, smiling at him before returning his attention to the girl.

Mike’s saying something to him, asking him something, but he’s no longer listening. He’s watching the girl, because she’s still watching him. When he speaks, he cuts over Mike’s voice completely. He doesn’t plan it. The words just come out, unbidden.

“Hello, Eleven.”

Mike falters and stops talking, mouth still open.

The girl shows no surprise or confusion whatsoever at the name, or his use of it. It’s a familiar name to her. He sees that clearly.

“Hi.”

They’re all silent for a few moments, looking at each other cautiously. It seems like they’re waiting for him to say something, because he’s the adult, but he doesn’t know what else to say. He suddenly, very badly, wants to see her wrist. To see if the tattoo is there. If it actually exists. But he can’t ask her that. That’s illogical.

But he doesn’t have to.

Without breaking eye contact, she rolls up the sleeve of her sweater, as if she’s suddenly too warm. She extends her hand to Mike, reaching for the movie they’ve picked out. And coincidentally or not, the motion turns her exposed wrist toward him.

He sees her pale skin. The small bones of her wrist. He sees everything, because he’s a scientist, so he most definitely sees the black marks on her wrist.

011

Scott exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He doesn’t have to say anything else. And he gives in, just like that. He believes. He believes everything. The fact that he doesn’t feel the slightest bit of surprise tells him that even when he was arguing with himself, he

was already convinced.

Eleven gives him a tiny smile, taking the movie from Mike before rolling her sleeve back down. He watches her in awe for a few seconds. He already knew she was a sweet girl, a thoughtful girl. And now he knows something else. She's a hero. He smiles at them both, trying to put his belief into the smile. Trying to make it as warm as possible, so they know he understands. And maybe it works, because they both grin at him. It's time to move on, but his mind is very busy, processing everything he knows.

"Have a good weekend, you two."

"You too," they both say. They watch him walk away. Mike gently touches her arm and they start moving, too. They can hear their friends squabbling, and then shouting as something rips. Mike rolls his eyes at El and she laughs.

On Sunday, they're hanging out at the Hopper household, watching the movie they've picked out. Hopper's attempting to make dinner for them, because he's tired of eating pizza every damn time they come over. It's not going well, judging from the burned smell and Hopper's grumbling. Dustin helpfully shouts cooking tips at him from his place on the couch until Lucas elbows him to shut up, because he can't hear the movie. Dustin asks him to pause it, presumably so he can continue pestering Hopper. Lucas gives him a dark look and Dustin gives up. A few minutes later, they pause it anyway. They have to. The smell is horrible now; a choking, acrid smell. It smells like burned hair.

Mike wrinkles his nose in disgust.

"Where...where are the kittens?" Dustin asks, suddenly alarmed.

"The kittens are fine," Hopper says irritably. "Dinner is not."

"You don't say," Lucas mutters, and they all laugh.

Dustin theatrically waves a hand across his face and heads into the kitchen to watch Hopper lose his shit. Lucas opens the windows before following him. Will, who actually can cook, trails after. He's

had a lot of practice helping out after his mom has attempted to cook, and he might be able to salvage something out of the meal. And he'll be a barrier in between Hopper and his giggling friends. Although he has nothing to worry about, because Hopper is laughing, too. The sound startles Dustin and Lucas into silence and they gape at each other.

Mike's halfway in between the kitchen and living room, keeping an eye on the fun in the kitchen while waiting for El, because she's lingering in the living room.

Eleven is standing in front of the open window, staring out at something.

"El?"

She turns to him and smiles. He smiles back.

"Mike! Check this out!" Dustin screeches, and Mike laughs before hurrying into the kitchen. Eleven doesn't follow, because she's seen something outside.

She walks to the door and puts her hand on the glass for a minute, just gazing. Then she quietly opens the door and closes it behind her. She walks down the steps slowly. There are bikes parked in front of the house, which isn't what caught her attention.

There are five bikes parked in front of the house.

Not four, like a few hours ago.

Five.

The new addition is shiny and pretty and stands apart from the rest. There's a ribbon around the seat, and something is sticking out from underneath. The ribbon's holding it in place. She approaches carefully, slowly, before reaching out and touching it. It's an envelope. She tugs it out from under the ribbon and opens it. She pulls out the card and looks at the front.

On the front is a man with a beard, in a red and white suit. She knows who he is now, because her friends told her. It's Santa Claus, the man that breaks into your house and steals all of your food before



leaving you a gift. It's a Christmas card, even though Christmas is over. She opens the card curiously.

Eleven,

Thank you again for your thoughtful Christmas gift. I thought you might enjoy this. Merry (belated) Christmas!

Welcome home.

-S. Clarke

"Woah."

Eleven looks up from the card, startled. Mike's standing on the steps. He absently jumps down the last step and joins her, still staring at the bike. Wordlessly, she hands him the card and he scans it quickly before grinning.

"Awesome!"

She touches the handlebar gently, reverently.

"Dinner's ready! It might even be edible!" Dustin calls, peeking his head around the door. He doesn't open it all the way, to keep the kittens from darting out. He sees them and stops.

"Holy shit."

"What?" Lucas asks, prodding him out of the way to get a better look.

"I can't see over either of you," Will grumbles.

Dustin finally descends the steps and the others follow. Will quickly shuts the door because the kittens are right behind him. They stand in a circle around the new bike.

"Wow," Lucas says, impressed.

They're busy inspecting the bike, but Dustin glances up at Mike.

“Who’s this from?” He doesn’t need to ask who it’s for, that’s obvious. “This is an expensive bike. Like, a really expensive bike.” He pats the seat reverently. Mike glances at Eleven and she nods. He hands over the card and Dustin reads it before it’s snatched from his hands.

“Seriously? You’ve got to be shitting me!”

“Wow. Mr. Clarke is awesome. Like, more awesome than we already thought,” Lucas says, handing the card to Will.

“Mr. Clarke never gave me a bike,” Dustin tells them sadly.

Lucas rolls his eyes but Dustin isn’t finished.

“I thought I was his favorite!”

“You didn’t come back from the dead recently, dumbass,” Lucas points out.

Dustin nods thoughtfully, still patting the bike. “That’s true. Maybe I should do that.”

“I did that, and I still didn’t get a new bike,” Will jokes, and they all laugh.

“The food is not getting any more edible!” Hopper shouts, opening the door a crack. He doesn’t need to inspect the bike or the card, because he already knows about it. Scott called him yesterday and made sure it was okay. He’s not thrilled that someone else is in on the secret, but Scott’s a good guy. He trusts him.

“No shit,” Dustin sighs, walking toward the steps. The guys follow him, except for Mike, because Eleven hasn’t moved yet.

“You want to ride it?” Mike asks her, watching the expression on her face.

She nods. She knows how to ride a bike now, because Lucas taught her. Mike unties the ribbon from the seat and shoves it into his pocket. Before she gets on, though, she turns to face Mike. And she repeats the words he said to her, over a year ago, when she waited for him under the power lines.

“Hop on,” she says, and pats the seat.

Mike laughs and climbs on. She gets on in front of him. She’s a little wobbly, but they aren’t likely to fall. She won’t let them. It’s nice, finally having a bike of her own. She knows she can still ride behind Mike, on his bike. And now he can ride behind her, on hers. You thank people when they give you gifts, and this is a very good gift. She’ll have to thank Mr. Clarke more than once.

She may even have to move Mr. Clarke up on her list.